Critical Readings of Perceptual Models in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson: Bass Culture

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Abstract

This thesis offers an extended reading of the poetry of the Jamaican-born British poet and reggae performer Linton Kwesi Johnson and seeks through these readings to also understand the wider Anglophone Caribbean literary canon's concern to define a Caribbean aesthetic. It proposes three perspectives through which to understand Johnson's influences and to analyse the relationship between aesthetics and politics in his poetry: first, the Anglophone Caribbean literary canon (chapter 1); second, British reggae and punk subcultures (chapter 2); and, third, Jamaican dub and reggae music (chapter 3). By taking up these three perspectives, the thesis positions Johnson's poetry within, respectively, the post-independence Caribbean canon, post-war British poetry, and Black British writing. The thesis demonstrates how Johnson's poetry and criticism both implicitly and explicitly think through the importance of aesthetic choices in the process of generating different forms of black political consciousness through poetry. As reflected in the order of the chapters, Johnson's poetry and criticism recovers a Caribbean past, while also voicing the Black British present, and finally anticipates a utopian 'dubwise' future. Throughout, the thesis acknowledges the interconnectedness of these three elements, and discusses how Johnson's work is filled with tensions between themes of universality and Jamaican particularity, political commitment and aestheticism.

More concretely, the thesis argues that Johnson takes forward and redirects Kamau Brathwaite's and The Caribbean Artist Movement's interest in defining a Caribbean aesthetic. He paradoxically continues Brathwaite's project of developing new and authentically Caribbean 'perceptual models' in poetry by interacting with the punk movement and creating specifically Black British forms of reggae. Reading Johnson's poetry through the prism of the Caribbean canon, and the canon through the lens of Johnson's poetry, therefore allows us to see that the concept of a Caribbean aesthetic is not only a stylistic or ethnic category, but also a methodological one. Furthermore, the thesis shows that Johnson is inspired by the belief systems of dub and reggae music to develop the core aesthetic-political concept of 'bass culture'. The concept frames Caribbean aesthetics, as well as black aesthetics more generally, as radically inclusive, even universal categories, which nonetheless have a determinate content.

Overall, the thesis extends existing academic scholarship on Johnson's poetry, while contributing more broadly to our understanding of both the possibilities and limitations involved in approaching Caribbean literature, Black British literature, and British literature as distinct categories.

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Note on the Text

Linton Kwesi Johnson writes in a phonetic rendition of Jamaican patois. He uses irregular and inconsistent spellings of words throughout collections, and sometimes within the same poem. He also often does not capitalise place names. In this thesis I have aimed always to quote Johnson exactly as his words appear in the edition from which I am citing.

It should further be noted that the titles of Johnson's work cited in the thesis can vary in spelling depending on whether the reference is to individual poems, poetry collections, or albums. For example, *Dread Beat and Blood* is the title of Johnson's poetry collection from 1975, while 'Dread Beat an Blood' is the title of the poem in the Penguin *Selected Poems* edition from 2006, and *Dread Beat an' Blood* is the title of the album from 1978.

While I have made every effort to be entirely faithful to my sources and to Johnson's spelling conventions, the irregularity of his usage, as above, has meant that I have often had to override the auto-spellchecker function in Word. This may have had the result of throwing up some spelling anomalies, however I have endeavoured wherever possible to minimise these. In short quotations included in the main text, line breaks are indicated with a slash. I capitalise Black British but use lower-case 'black' in the case of other designations (for example, 'black Atlantic').

I use the following abbreviations:
LKJ: Linton Kwesi Johnson
CAM: The Caribbean Artist Movement
RAR: Rock Against Racism.

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0. Introduction

> Consciously setting out to transform the consciousness of the sufferer, to politicize him culturally through music, song and poetry, the lyricist contributes to the continuing struggle of the oppressed
> (Johnson, 1976, 411).

This thesis offers an extended reading of the poetry of the Jamaican-born Black British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson and, through this analysis, attempts to understand Johnson's position in the context of both the 20th-century Anglophone Caribbean literary canon and post-war British poetry. It argues that Johnson's writing paradoxically continues and develops a core paradigm in the Caribbean literary tradition by writing poetry that self-consciously identifies as Black British. By writing about the Black British experience specifically, Johnson builds on what I will argue is a defining characteristic of Caribbean poetry generally as formulated by leading Caribbean literary critics in the second half of the 20th-century: that poetry should be true to the poet's own experience, environment, and 'perceptual models'. Kamau Brathwaite develops this key concept 'perceptual models' in *History of the Voice* (Brathwaite, 1984, 8), using it to refer to features of poetry that reflect and inscribe authentic Caribbean cultures, experiences, and environments, including aspects of spoken language, as well as tropical imagery and rhythm patterns.[1] This thesis demonstrates how the concept of perceptual models is crucial to understanding the ways in which Johnson's poetry both extends and redirects some of the central debates in the Anglophone Caribbean literary canon.

For Brathwaite, it is only by embracing their own individual position and perceptual model that Caribbean poets can say something valuable about the world. Perhaps counterintuitively, then, Johnson is, as he has declared, 'a child of the Caribbean Artist

[1] The core critical concept in the thesis 'perceptual models' is put in quotes here where I introduce the term, and when I cite Brathwaite directly, otherwise I will use the term without.

Movement'.[2] However, his identity as a Caribbean poet is, I argue, just as importantly defined by his interaction with the British punk movement and UK-based sound-system culture in the late 1970s. Through his engagement with the genre of reggae poetry, or what is more commonly called 'dub poetry', Johnson explores how reggae, and 'peripheral' Caribbean writing more generally, can transcend the geographical and socio-political coordinates of the Caribbean to find new multi-ethnic audiences in the UK, and the world beyond. The poetry recovers a Caribbean past, whilst also giving voice to the Black British present, before finally attempting to create new conjoined or hybridised aesthetic communities for the future beyond these two seemingly distinct ethnic and national identities.

The thesis is divided into three chapters according to these three differently inflected, although often interrelated, avenues of interest. Chapter one explores what I will call Johnson's 'Caribbean aesthetic'; chapter two discusses his seemingly countervailing yet linked contribution to British reggae and the punk-inspired 'black new wave'; and chapter three considers his involvement in writing reggae through the genre of dub poetry, and how this is related to the concept of *bass culture*. All three chapters point to how aesthetic choices and strong political statements are in constant dialogue through a complex set of interrelationships in all aspects of Johnson's work.

It is important to stress from the outset that the thesis is not a biographical study. The thesis does not approach Johnson's poetry or career in chronological order, although the trajectory of the chapters traces what might be viewed as a development from an idealised Caribbean origin to a more self-aware, unique, and diasporic black aesthetic expression. Rather, the aim of the three chapters is to present three different conceptual frameworks that can help us to understand more fully what I will show to be the three core sources of aesthetic-political influence on Johnson's poetry: the Caribbean literary canon, Black British

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[2] Golden PEN Award Acceptance speech. Online source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz1UlcTt7LM. The quoted statement is at 1.04 –1.12 [19.05.17, 13.46].

culture, and Jamaican dub music. These three perspectives that map Johnson's influences serve as overarching critical lenses through which other more subsidiary interests that manifest across a range of different periods in Johnson's writing can be viewed. This conceptual approach also acknowledges the complexity of the ways in which he responds to and integrates these cultural sources. Jamaican dub, for instance, is as important for understanding Johnson's poetic homage to C.L.R James in the 1990s as it is to understanding his depiction of sound systems in the 1970s. This thesis's three perspectives therefore also work to break up and free the poems from the simplified categorisation of Johnson's work into '1970s verse', '1980s verse', and '1990s verse' that is found in the most widely read Penguin edition from 2006 (Johnson, 2006).

The three chapters and their alternating perspectives also challenge the notion that Johnson's poetry has somehow seen its heyday, that it is rooted in the past, or that dub poetry more generally is 'dead' (Miller, 2013). Although his most famous poems were written in the 1970s and 1980s, they responded to black aesthetic paradigms from the past and the present, as well as anticipating some future traits and tropes. For example, the notion of linear time in his work is more complicated than often assumed (Johnson, 2006; Saroukhani, 2015; Masone, 2017), because his poetry combines an acute awareness of his present with a sense of both tradition and timelessness. Though widely celebrated for his commentary on the politics of the 1970s, little attention has been paid to this latter, timeless and utopian dimension of his work, and the thesis attempts to correct this oversight. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, I therefore challenge critical views of Johnson as a poet exclusively of the 1970s and will show that, by contrast, his work has been in constant dialogue with a much longer black aesthetic tradition, as well as responding to changes in black literary expressions in Britain.

The first chapter, 'Caribbean Aesthetics: Dubbing the Canon', uses discourse analysis to show how Johnson's individual style is deeply embedded in a late 20th-century tradition of Anglophone Caribbean literary critical discourse, and particularly the legacy of the Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) from the 1960s. The aim of reading Johnson in relation to the Anglophone Caribbean canon, however, is to identify features of Johnson's style and view of poetry *specifically.* I examine the apparent paradox that emerges as Johnson at once asserts and recovers his Caribbean identity by developing a specifically Black British perspective on the Caribbean. By writing about the Black British experience, Johnson builds on what I will identify as a core characteristic of mid-20th-century Caribbean poetry through readings of his relationship with Kamau Brathwaite, T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, and Gordon Rohlehr. Johnson develops and personalises their divergent yet linked understanding that the voice of the poet should remain committed to the poet's own place, environment, and perceptual models.

The second chapter, 'The Black New Wave: Re-reading Johnson's poetry in its British Contexts', presents readings of archival material from the alternative British music press in the late 1970s and early '80s, such as *New Musical Express*, *Sounds*, *Black Music* and *Melody Maker*, to document the ways in which Johnson gives voice to the Black British experience during this period by incorporating aesthetic elements from punk and new wave movements. The chapter demonstrates how reading Johnson alongside punk performers such as John Cooper Clarke makes it possible to identify new and evolving aspects of Johnson's poetry from these years. These include his 'do it yourself' (DIY) poetics, his confrontational anti-fascist rhetoric, and the social realist currents in parts of his work. An analysis of these poetic cross-currents makes it possible to see that Johnson's work is far more interrelated with 'white' British writing in the period than has previously been acknowledged, and that

his aesthetic should be seen to draw on a wider set of local British sub-cultural and literary influences.

Building on this reading, the third chapter, 'Bass Culture: Dub and the Universal Sufferer', investigates Johnson's contribution to the popularisation of the genre of dub poetry and his coining of the term 'bass culture'. In a close reading of a selection of Johnson's poems from his most productive decades, I highlight how he incorporates the belief system of reggae and dub music into his poetry, especially the ways in which reggae musicians and producers view the relationship between aesthetics and politics. From this perspective, I identify some of dub poetry's main formal and thematic features as a genre (in print), and explore some of the factors that allow us to distinguish a group of literary practitioners that have come to be defined as 'dub poets', a group including not only Johnson but also Michael Smith, and Jean 'Binta' Breeze. This chapter concludes by suggesting that Johnson's poetry is characterized by an incorporation of reggae music, and the sensory aesthetic of dub in particular, that seeks to go beyond the specificity of Jamaica in order to embrace the British experience – and ultimately, to appeal to a wider, perhaps even universal, condition of the human 'sufferer'.

0.1 Centring Caribbean Aesthetics

In this introduction, I situate the thesis within the wider academic reception of Johnson's work and explain how it further contributes to the fields of Black British studies, Caribbean literary studies, and the study of black aesthetics more generally. To begin, the thesis develops and nuances current critical understandings of Johnson's poetry by exploring his explicit engagement with aesthetic questions and concerns, thereby enriching the field of Caribbean literary studies by emphasising the importance of aesthetics to poets in the Caribbean canon. It also demonstrates that a recognition of Caribbean and Black British

writers' mutual interests in Caribbean aesthetics, as Johnon's poetry illustrate, can offer a new means of conceptualising how these categories of writing both overlap and diverge. The thesis therefore underscores some of the possibilities and limitations in seeing the two as distinct forms of writing. Furthermore, the thesis contends that Johnson's *ouvre* shows that post-war 'white British' writing and Black British writing have more in common than is often acknowledged, arguing that we need to probe the formal and thematic tendencies that figure across these categories.

First, however, I will outline further the scope of thesis by offering a reading of 'Bass Culture' in order to demonstrate that my critical arguments are grounded in Johnson's poetry, highlighting some of the formal and thematic qualities of his poetic voice to which I will return throughout the thesis. To proceed, therefore, a clarification of some key terms is necessary. When Johnson first started to use the term 'dub poetry', the intention was to argue that deejays who toasted (talked) over dub instrumentals ought to be considered as poets. In the article 'Jamaican Rebel music' (1976), Johnson asserts both that 'The "dub-lyricist" is the DJ turned poet', and that 'Dub-lyricists include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others' (Johnson, 1976, 398). Johnson did not however consider himself a dub poet, and was surprised when people started calling him one. He preferred the term 'reggae poetry', but he has come to accept the dub poet label (Morris, 1989, 261). In what follows, 'dub poetry' and 'reggae poetry' will be used interchangeably to refer to Johnson's poetry and all (directly and substantially) reggae-inspired oral or printed poetry.

Many of Johnson's dub poems portray musical happenings and events, especially at 'sound systems'. In London in the 1970s, a sound system was typically a location where Jamaicans would go to have a party and listen to music. A sound system can be defined as a Jamaican version of a 'mobile discotheque', consisting of massive speakers piled one on top

of another, set up in an open, fenced-off space outside, or inside a hall. The resulting space, whether outside or inside, is called a dance hall (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 377). Indicatively, then, Johnson's poem 'Bass Culture' is about being at a sound system, and about the aesthetic experience of listening to the heavy bass thumping out of the gigantic speakers:

> muzik of blood
> black reared
> pain rooted
> heart geared
>
> all tensed up
> in di bubble an di bounce
> an di leap and di weight-drop
>
> it is di beat of di heart
> this pulsing of blood
> that is a bubblin bass
> a bad bad beat
> pushin gainst di wall
> whe 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
>
> bad out deh
>
> hattah dan di hites of fire
> livin heat doun volcano core
> is di cultural wave a dread people deal
>
> spirits riled
> an rise and rail thunda-wise
> latent powah
> in a form resemblin madness
> like violence is di show
> burstin outta slave shackle
> look ya! boun fi harm di wicked
> man feel him
> him hurt confirm
> man site
> destruction all aroun
> man turn
> love still confirm
> him destiny a shine lite-wise
> soh life tek the form whe shif from calm
> an hold di way of a deadly storm
>
> culture pulsin
> high temprature blood
> swingin anger
> shatterin di tightened hold
> the false fold
> round flesh whe wail freedom
> bittah cause a blues
> cause a maggot suffering
> cause a blood klaat pressure
> yet still breedin love
> far more mellow
> than di soun of shapes
> chanting loudly
>
> SCATTA- MATTA- SHATTA- SHACK!
> What a beat!
>
> for di time is nigh
> when passion gather high
> when di beat jus lash
> when di wall mus smash
> an di beat will shif
> as di culture alltah
> when oppression scatah (Johnson, 2006, 14–16).

'Bass Culture' contains many interesting sound features that I will discuss in more detail in the third chapter. Here, I want to emphasise the importance of bass in the poem. Phrases like 'bubble an di bounce', 'bubblin bass', and 'di leap and di weight-drop' use an alliterative emphasis on 'b' and 'd' to evoke the intensity and specific qualities of the bass soundscape. The consonant 'b', in particular, as the voiced bilabial plosive, makes the poem feel bass-heavy, creating an awareness of the bass in the reader's own voice or thoughts. Using this sound effect, the poem as it were performs the bass experience through the individual reader's

experience. This experience of bass is therefore found in the poem's formal qualities, but 'Bass Culture' also configures this aesthetic experience as the theme and content of the poem. Representative of Johnson's poetry more widely, this poem foregrounds the aesthetic experience, both implicitly and explicitly, and at the levels of form and of content, of tenor and vehicle. Indeed, Johnson himself has commented on how important music, and particularly bass, is for his poetics: 'There was always a beat, or a bass line, going on at the back of my head with the words. And so I developed this style of writing – always with music in mind, always hearing music when I'm composing my poetry, or writing my poetry' (Morris, 1989, 253). His comments about his method reinforce the image of the bass line as something felt by the poet from within, physically embedded in the poetry and thus communicated to the reader.

Lines like 'pulsing of blood' and 'beat of di heart' also focus on the visceral qualities evoked by the bass. The focus on core bodily functions and organic metaphors portrays the bass as a rhythmic natural force rather than something artificial, composed, or purposefully structured. Indeed, the bass is so strong that it is 'pushin gainst di wall'. Typically, bass has a strong physical presence in the room and can be observed in the vibrations of objects. The deeper the bass is, the more the room vibrates. At the same time, the bass is contained, either by walls when the sound system is inside a house, or by the surrounding architecture of barriers when it is outside. Bass is by nature something aesthetic that has the power to intervene and affect its context: to shake, vibrate, and move things. This is powerfully expressed in the closing stanza of 'Bass Culture':

> for di time is nigh
> when passion gather high
> when di beat jus lash
> an di wall mus smash
> an di beat will shif
> as di culture alltah
> when oppression scatah.

In the first stanza the bass is ‘pushin gainst di wall’; in the last stanza ‘di wall mus smash’. This incremental progression creates a strong impression of the bass *itself* as a powerful force. As this thesis argues throughout, Johnson’s use of bass imagery, combined together with a spectrum of other poetic and sonic effects, challenges the often-assumed opposition between cerebral aesthetic experience and the possibility of violent societal change and bodily impact (Kant, 1951, 58). When the music ‘shif’, oppression ‘scatah’. In Johnson’s poetry, music has the power to affect and even transform an oppressive world.[3]

The image of bass and the concept of bass culture are central to understanding the close relationship between aesthetics and politics in Johnson’s work. The coupling of bass with culture indicated by the concept of bass culture creates a special relationship between bass as referring to a purely aesthetic experience, and as an instrument producing historical and social change: ‘an di beat will shif/ as di culture alltah’. Many of Johnson’s poems challenge the strict division between aesthetics and real material politics by constructing a world in which the sensory experience of dub music on the one hand, and resistance against violent historical forces such as race and class oppression on the other, combine in interesting ways. ‘Di beat’, which is immaterial or symbolic, is represented as something that can ‘smash’ physical barriers. The introduction of the term ‘bass history’, a variation of bass culture, in the poem ‘Reggae Sounds’, further exemplifies the importance of this concept in Johnson’s poetry (Johnson, 2006, 17).

By focusing on Johnson’s continuation *and* redirection of some of the core discussions about a Caribbean aesthetic in Caribbean literary criticism, this thesis argues that although Johnson is most famous for his activist involvements and his political message of

[3] It is important to note, however, that Johnson has contended that art itself cannot change political situations without the organised and determined work of political movements (Prasad, 2002). One could therefore suppose that the views expressed in his poems are more idealistic and hold a more romantic and optimistic view of art than the opinions he expresses elsewhere. Yet, as is essential to the main argument of this thesis, the tension between these two sentiments is effectively a tension between Johnson’s different, and sometimes conflicting, political ambitions, as I will discuss in the third chapter.

black empowerment and self-determination, he also is a poet self-consciously engaged with aesthetic and formal questions as part of his field of creative and critical enquiry. My use of the term 'aesthetics' throughout reflects Alexander Baumgarten's philosophical definition of aesthetics as 'the science of sensual cognition' (Hammermeister, 2002, 8), which is manifested in, but is not limited to, art and literary work (Hammermeister, 2002, 7). In accordance with this broad meaning of the term, I apply two slightly different uses of the word in my thesis: one that refers to literary form and one that refers to aesthetic experience in the meaning of 'sensory perception' in general. The fact that the word has these two different meanings, one related to literary works and one related to *all* forms of experience, is essential to my argument about the importance of aesthetics in Johnson's poetry. This is because Johnson is interested in the aesthetic experience of poems, of songs, and of everyday life, especially those that take place in the sound systems. Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics, which encompasses both art and nature, can include the spectrum of these different forms of experience in a way that medium-dependent or art-specific definitions cannot.

Brathwaite's concept of Caribbean perceptual models in poetry depends on this double meaning of the term 'aesthetics', as well as this wider generality. In his view, the aesthetics of poetic form is inherently linked to the aesthetic experience of one's environment. In other words, the sensory experience of poetry affects our sensory experience of our everyday environment, and vice versa. In dialogue with Brathwaite, I am in this thesis more interested in using aesthetics as a term that discusses the study of, or the sensory perception of poetry and music in descriptive terms (an interest shared by Baumgarten), and less so in engaging with normative standards of taste. In general, I do not therefore use the term 'aesthetic' to express judgements about quality or beauty, but employ it to highlight the sensory dimensions of an art work, including spoken, chanted and other oral forms. In

addition, although there is no binary distinction between the sensory and the intellectual dimension of poetry, Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics shows that it is still useful to make a distinction between experiences that are *primarily* sensory and experiences that are primarily deliberative or intellectual.

The emphasis on the political over the aesthetic in the reception of Johnson is a tendency that has coloured critical responses to his poetry, and this oversight is interrogated throughout what follows. Rather than remaining preoccupied with his explicit political statements or discourse, the thesis proposes that it is instead Johnson's deep engagement with questions of Caribbean aesthetics and the political implications of aesthetic interventions through poetry that positions him within a Caribbean critical tradition. However, this is not to exclude him from a British tradition of diasporic writing either.[4] On the contrary, his emphasis on making aesthetic interventions, inspired by the concept of Caribbean aesthetics, interestingly helps to constitute his unique Black British style.

Apart from his obvious use of Jamaican Creole or patois, is it possible to say what might be specifically Caribbean about Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry? As the opening epigraph manifests, Johnson's poetry attempts to transform the consciousness of the oppressed by politicising him or her 'culturally through music, song, and poetry', more precisely through reggae and dub music. Like many of his Caribbean predecessors, therefore, he emphasises that the political potential in poetry lies in its ability to *transform* people's consciousness *through,* or in relation to, its particular artistic forms and patterns, many of which for Johnson are musical in form or derivation. One of the principles that Johnson inherits from reggae music, is that the sufferers' 'core consciousness' (Damasio, 2000) and perception is as central to the prospect of political change as his or her rational convictions, opinions, and political ideologies. In fact, reggae artists have often been particularly sceptical

[4] While Johnson's explicit political statements make it possible to situate his work within a black radical and postcolonial field, it does not, I argue, provide us with sufficient evidence to locate him within a specifically *Caribbean* literary discourse.

of dominant political ideologies, or what Michael Freeden more precisely calls 'macro-ideologies'. This term refers to the prevailing ideologies of the 20th-century: 'Liberalism, conservatism, socialism, fascism, communism, and other major families […]' (Freeden, 2003, 78). As Bob Marley revealingly sings in 'Get up Stand up': 'We sick an' tired of-a your ism skism game'.[5] If the reggae tradition has often been sceptical of these macro-ideologies, then I would suggest that it does not make sense to think of Johnson's politics as purely based on established political ideologies like democratic socialism, communism, or liberalism. This thesis suggests that macro-ideologies, in addition to some established Marxist and postcolonial frameworks, only allow us to explicate Johnson's political poetry *to a certain degree*.[6] Understanding Johnson's broader social, cultural and aesthetic engagement with Caribbean aesthetics – and reggae in particular – is just as important, if not more so, for developing an understanding of his politics. This commitment to Caribbean aesthetics and politics is further indicated by his affiliation with radical black arts movements such as The Caribbean Artist Movement, Creation for Liberation and the Notting Hill Carnival Committee.

Many philosophers and critics in different traditions have argued that there is a close relationship between aesthetics and politics, from the German classicist philosopher Friedrich Schiller through the modernist scholar Theodor Adorno to contemporary thinkers like Jacques Rancière (Rancière, 2004; Adorno, 2013; Schiller, 2016; Benjamin, 2008; Lukács, 1971; Bourriaud, 2002; Bürger, 1984). The Caribbean literary tradition's emphasis on Caribbean perceptual models, which is taken up in Johnson's poetry engages with this question in a way that bears striking similarities with some of these central debates in aesthetic theory about how the relationship between aesthetics and politics should be defined.

[5] Bob Marley/Peter Tosh, 'Get up, stand up' (1973). Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobmarley/getupstandup.html [17.05, 18.01].

[6] When I refer to postcolonial frameworks here, I primarily have in mind those associated with what Simon Gikandi describes as 'anti-western strategy' (Gikandi, 2004, 99).

Particularly relevant is Rancière's commentary on the politics of aesthetics and the 'redistribution of the sensible', as I discuss in chapter three (Rancière, 2004). Acknowledging this similarity is necessary because it shows that Johnson's fundamental belief that there is a relationship between aesthetics and politics relates to a wide-reaching field of enquiry in literary and aesthetic theory, and his writing itself participates in this debate. The aim of this thesis is therefore not ontologically or epistemologically to explore *whether* there is a link between aesthetics and politics in Johnson's poetry. Rather, it takes this link as its starting point, instead exploring *how,* and through which arguments and poetic strategies, Johnson treat this subject in his own context, particularly in relation to the Caribbean canon and reggae culture. Furthermore, I also refer to how Johnson's view of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is embedded in a tradition within black radical thought, as expressed, for instance, in the emphasis on the negro spiritual in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the aesthetic ideals formulated by the New Negro Movement (Hughes, 1926; Locke, 1925; Du Bois, 1926; Watts, 2012).

In Johnson's poetry sensory stimuli and political awareness are seen as closely intertwined, if not interdependent facets. Interestingly, and in a similar vein, cognitive theorist Antonio Damasio distinguishes between core and extended consciousness: 'If core consciousness allows you to know for a transient moment that it is you seeing a bird in flight or that it is you having a sensation of pain, extended consciousness places these same experiences in a broader canvas and over a longer period of time' (Damasio, 2000, 196). Although core consciousness allows us to experience or feel something in an isolated moment, extended consciousness allows for the creation of autobiographical narratives, and through those for the construction of a more self-reflexive and contingent self. Relatedly, Damasio also distinguishes 'high reason' from feelings and emotions. According to Damasio, our consciousness is in reality a highly complex constellation of processes that cannot be

accurately described in schematic conceptual models. Yet, he maintains that it is useful to construct models that can aid us in explaining the different, more or less autobiographical and self-reflexive, 'layers' of our cognitive faculties (Damasio, 2000). In Johnson's poetry, there is similarly an emphasis on the role of bass, or what we can sense and feel here and now (core consciousness), as a route to the creation of political awareness (extended consciousness and high reason). Culture is seen as a political tool because it not only convinces people rationally, but also transforms people's feelings and emotions. In these both implicit and explicit ways, Johnson's poetry and criticism think through the importance of aesthetic choices and the sensory experiences that they evoke, in the process of creating different forms of political intervention through poetry.

0.2 Biography and Publication History

Linton Kwesi Johnson (b. Linton Johnson) was born in 1952 in Chapelton, a small rural town in Jamaica. He moved to London at the age of 11 to join his mother who had immigrated two years earlier. In London, he attended Tulse Hill Comprehensive and lived with his mother in Brixton, an area of London with many Jamaican immigrants that would later be vividly depicted in his poetry (Johnson, 1991; Wheatle, 2019; Stewart, 1993). John McLeod points out that Johnson's 'arrival as a child makes him distinctive', showing how his life and work 'forms a bridge' between the postwar generation of Caribbean immigrants and the 'so called "second-generation" British-born black Britons' (McLeod, 2004, 130).[7] This Jamaican birth and London childhood mark Johnson's position as a poet who straddles cultures, occupying a space in-between the two traditions of Caribbean and Black British literature. Johnson is not Black British in a narrow sense, but his life and work does depart from a purely, or strictly

[7] Caryl Phillips, who is six years younger than Johnson, came to England from St.Kitts when he was four months old. He describes the experience of belonging to a transitional generation in the following striking terms: 'too late to be coloured, but too soon to be British' (Phillips, 2001, 40).

'authentic', Caribbean identity. Johnson's biography and dual identity thus encapsulates his position as a writer bridging and intermediating different, yet related, traditions. At the same time, his writing also represents a stage in the evolution of Caribbean poetry and Black British writing as self-consciously separate yet linked literary traditions.

Johnson's life trajectory, both his geographical location and location in time, invites a wider discussion about the definition of Caribbean literature, especially as to where its outer boundaries might be drawn. When it comes to migrant writing from the Caribbean in Britain, when does this writing cease to be Caribbean, and when does it become Black British? Alternatively, when does poetry become simply British, and when does it become something else entirely, or something in-between? Johnson was too young to be counted a member of the Caribbean Artist Movement, but he was old enough to have attended their meetings (Walmsley, 1992; Schwarz, 2003). Johnson's location in time thus creates an important point of contact between the Caribbean expatriate writers from the 1950s and '60s, and the generation of British-born black people who were trying to carve out a new identity in the following decades (Low, 2006; Basso, 2016; McLeod, 2002). To develop this sense of intergenerational contact, the thesis at once explores Johnson's place in the Caribbean canon *whilst also* casting Johnson as a transformative figure drawing Caribbean culture out of the constricted geographic and stylistic borders of the Anglophone Caribbean and into new territory. This development is addressed in particular detail in the second and third chapters.

Johnson's poetry, and his motivation to write, were furthermore born out of a generational response to an archive of black Atlantic writing and intellectual thought. Johnson's poetry was from the beginning fully aware of its influences and its indebtedness to some of the major figures in 20th-century black radical aesthetic thinking (Caesar, 1996; McGuirk, 1998; Wheatle, 2009; Gilroy, 2003). This reinforces the importance of reading Johnson's work in relation not only to core debates in Caribbean literature, but also around

African American writing, as I discuss in chapter three. This perspective also highlights the importance of recognising his contribution to our conceptualisation of black aesthetics as a category in use and as a field of experimentation and play. Recognizing this *self-conscious* element of Johnson's work is key to the core arguments of the thesis.

While at school, Johnson joined the Black Panthers' youth section in 1970, and helped the movement organize poetry workshops with a group of musicians and poets called Rasta Love.[8] The Panthers had access to a rich physical library where he was exposed to black literature and black intellectual thought. Johnson has frequently referred to this library's importance in introducing him to a legacy of poetry that he did not previously know existed, and that the English school system did not make available (Morris, 1989, 251). In addition to the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson discovered some of the seminal works of African American literature, most notably W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, which formed one of his core inspirations to begin writing poetry. Johnson wrote his first poems in 1970, at the relatively young age of 17. For Johnson, then, the library to which his membership of the Black Panthers gave him access became an important resource for his growing racial consciousness, while simultaneously offering him his first proper encounter with a black literary canon (Morris, 1989; Caesar, 1996; Dawson, 2006; Wild, 2015). Johnson's fond recollections of the Black Panthers' library speak to his close engagement and dialogue with other 20^{th-}century writers.

Two years after beginning to write poetry, Johnson began to study for a sociology degree at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he became an Honorary fellow in 2004 (Back, 2007; Johnson, 2006)[9]. His academic background and time at Goldsmiths is

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[8] Fore more on the history of the Black Panthers in London, see Anne-Marie Angelo's *The Black Panthers in London, 1967–1972* (Angelo, 2009).

[9] See also Johnson's profile on the alumni section of Goldsmith's website where he describes why he chose to study sociology. 'I took sociology as I thought it might provide me with the answers to society and my place in it': https://www.gold.ac.uk/our-people/profile-hub/sociology/undergraduate/linton-kwesi-johnson/ [19.05.17, 13.56].

perhaps the aspect of his biography that is most poorly understood. Johnson's public image has often been dominated by representations of the poet as belonging outside of the academic and literary establishments, a self-taught intellectual 'straight off the streets'. He has also often been described as the poet who 'voiced the experience of young black men in the 1980s' (Morrison, 2012). However, Johnson's time as a student in sociology, combined with his active engagement with the Black Panther's library, show that he was not only a figure who attempted to represent the young black male 'masses' at the time, but was also academically schooled and a frequenter of intellectual and literary circles. The young leader role that Johnson quickly established was largely due to his bringing together of these different worlds, as we will see in more detail in chapter two's discussion of his image as a reggae scholar. Johnson had a sense of life on the streets of Brixton, and had experienced police harassment, but he also managed to get one foot inside the establishment, and so differs from many of the working-class black male characters depicted in his poetry. This more conventional and academic aspect of Johnson's formation is important to this thesis's consideration of his poetry as self-critical and self-reflexive. Johnson has never had a naïve or intuitive approach to poetry, and when we consider his background, we have every reason to think that there are conscious judgments behind his rhetoric and aesthetic choices. In other words, many of the subtler details of his poetry and rhetorical choices offer insights into his larger political project.

In 1974, Johnson joined the collective *Race Today*, a political magazine established in 1969 by the Institute of Race Relations. The magazine was one of the most influential organs addressing black politics in Britain in the 1970s, and Johnson later became its arts editor. His participation on the editorial board enhanced Johnson's position as a young literary talent, and underscored his position as a writer from the younger generation who could also carry forward the mantle of black activism of the 1960s. His first volume of poems, *Voices of the*

Living and the Dead, came out with the *Race Today* imprint in 1974 (Pryce, 2009).[10] During his time at *Race Today*, he was also involved in many political campaigns and committees: in particular, the George Lindo Action Committee, formed to free a man wrongfully imprisoned, and the campaign against the government's plan to shut down the Notting Hill Carnival. He also joined an organization called Creation for Liberation that mobilised artists working with poetry, music, and painting to participate in public performances to raise money for the campaigns, and to foster the work of Black British artists (Morris, 1989; Caesar, 1996; Dawson, 2006; Donnell, 2001). As initiatives that brought together art, culture, and activism, these two campaigns provide examples of how, throughout his career, Johnson has balanced his roles as poet and as activist, always participating in movements that perceived these as two closely related interests. When we think of Johnson's poetry as engaged with exploring the political undercurrent of aesthetic choices, it is particularly important to underline his involvement in these cultural and political campaigns.

Johnson's second volume, *Dread Beat and Blood*, came out in 1975, and was released as a record in 1978. The volume was published by Bogle-L'Ouverture, a small press focused on Caribbean and Black British writers. In 1977, Johnson became the writer-in-residence for the London borough of Lambeth and was awarded the C. Day Lewis Fellowship. Both of these official roles helped to build Johnson's position as a young community leader whose name was slowly becoming better known outside his immediate circle of black radical artists and poets. Johnson's engagement in activism was in many ways modelled on the 1960s Civil rights movement in the United States and the black political consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s around the world, to which I will return in my discussion of the wider cultural context surrounding Johnson's work in the next section. His third volume of poetry, *Inglan is a Bitch*,

[10] *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) includes a play and only one poem. The latter is also icluded in *Dread Beat and Blood*.

was published in 1980, also by Bogle-L'Ouverture (Morris, 1989).[11] This volume became Johnson's commercial break-through as a poet; 'Inglan is a Bitch' is undoubtedly his most famous and widely cited poem. To many who remember the early 1980s, Johnson's name is synonymous with the aggressive and seemingly rude sentiment of this provocative statement. As the second chapter shows, Johnson's poetry, and 'Inglan is a Bitch' in particular, became a crossover hit that appealed to punk and rock audiences, in addition to the regular black reggae audiences in the UK.[12]

If, for the sake of clarity, we attempt to define a broad chronological development in Johnson's work, it is helpful to think of Johnson's *oeuvre* as mainly falling into three periods: the early period prior to the publication of 'Inglan is Bitch' (1974 to 1978); the period related to the appearance of this work (ca. 1978-81); and the period following (1981 to the present). Before 'Inglan is a Bitch', and in his work from the early 1970s, Johnson's poetry was more focused on dub, reggae music, and Caribbean culture. 'Inglan is a Bitch' represents a shift towards a more explicitly political and confrontational rhetoric where current British politics and affairs take centre stage. The time after 'Inglan is Bitch' stands as a distinct period in which Johnson gradually achieved greater recognition from the literary establishment. In this more recent time span, Johnson's *oeuvre* has more notably been shaped by the mode of his reception than by his actual production. Although Johnson's status and position continues to develop, it is fair to say that his most famous and influential work was produced between 1975 and 1980. *Tings an' Times: Selected Poems* was released by Bloodaxe in 1991, both as a book and as a record, and Johnson has remained active in performing his work all over the world, both as a poet and as a reggae artist.

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[11] British Council. Online source: https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/linton-kwesi-johnson [20.04.17, 21.18].

[12] Although, as I show in the second chapter, archival material from music magazines from this period suggests that he his records sold mostly to punk and rock audiences.

Johnson has released several reggae albums – *Dread Beat an' Blood* (1978), *Forces of Victory* (1979), *Bass Culture* (1980), *LKJ in Dub* (1980), *Making History* (1984), *Tings an' Times* (1991), *More Time* (1999), and *Live in Paris* (2004) – and has sold over 2 million records as a recording artist (Pryce, 2009). His career as a reggae artist is inseparable from his poetry, and hence he is rightly known for being both a poet and reggae performer, or as simply a performance poet. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Johnson published two volumes of conventional printed poetry, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) and *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975), before he released any recorded material. His first record, also called *Dread Beat an' Blood*, but spelled slightly differently, was released in 1978. Throughout his career, many of Johnson's poems have been accompanied by music or have been performed with a band on stage. Most of his earliest poems were, however, intended for print, with the musical score added as an accompaniment at a later stage. In more recent times, he has also written poems intended for albums written in collaboration with reggae producer Dennis Bovell (Morris, 1989, 255). He insists, nevertheless, that: 'People know me as a reggae artist; they don't know me as a poet. But I am a poet, and I began with the word' (DiNovella, 2007). I believe that these multimedia dimensions, and the somewhat ambiguous labelling of Johnson's work as performance poetry, are often over-emphasized, especially when we consider the conventional separation of printed poems and recordings that we find in his publication history and the related processes of marketing his work.

In 2002, a selection of Johnson's poetry called *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* was published in the Penguin Modern Classics series. Johnson was, along with Czesław Miłosz, one of only two living poets at the time in the series. The selection was republished as *Selected Poems* in 2006. Penguin's recognition of Johnson's poetry was an important turning point in his career, and suggests that he is slowly moving from the periphery of the literary

world towards its centre. His poetry is also translated into Italian and German (Johnson, 2006; Saroukhani, 2015). In December 2012, Johnson was awarded the Golden PEN Award by English PEN for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature – another important indicator of Johnson's new and still rising position in the literary establishment.

The Penguin *Selected Poems* edition is divided into three chapters: 'Seventies Verse', 'Eighties Verse', and 'Nineties Verse'. Johnson has himself used these decade-based categories when performing his poetry on stage (Johnson, 2006; Miller, 2013). They offer a useful way of categorizing the different periods in Johnson's work because his poetry has always engaged with its immediate historical context, although this thesis tends toward a more conceptual approach. For my concerns, my own periodisation built around 'Inglan is a Bitch' and outlined above is more useful, especially if we consider, as I will show in my first and second chapter, that there is a thematic and formal shift towards a more confrontational political rhetoric around 1980.

As a resource for literary research, Penguin's *Selected Poems* edition from 2006 has many weaknesses. It's editor remains unnamed, even though it includes footnotes that do not appear in the first editions. The footnotes explain Jamaican terms, historic references and context, but it is not clear who has written them. Neither does the edition give any information about when, nor in what volumes, the poems were originally published. Even so, I will for practical reasons use this edition – it is the only Penguin edition currently in print and the edition most read today. However, I will comment on differences that occur between the poetry reproduced in *Selected Poems*, and the originals included in the first editions of *Dread Beat and Blood* and *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, wherever I believe that significant changes have been made.[13] It is important to note that Johnson spells the same

[13] I will not be comparing the poems that first appeared on albums with the album versions, because I will not be analysing music directly. I will only analyse music inderectly, as something Johnson engages with and references in his printed poems. The albums I have found do not include printed lyrics, though they might exist in other issues and releases. However, I do not consider the various album versions a part of this study's scope.

words differently in different poems because he uses non-standardized Jamaican Creole. It might therefore be necessary to think of the differences between editions as variants within a continuum, rather than as copies of an unavailable original.

0.3 Wider Cultural Context

Johnson's serious critical engagement with popular music and his depiction of the bleak immigrant experience are just some of the factors that demonstrate the importance of positioning Johnson's writing in relation to preceding conversations amongst the 'Windrush writers' about race, politics, and the democratisation and diversification of the arts in the UK, as I will now discuss. Johnson's writing in the 1970s and '80s needs to be seen as an expression of a critical moment in which Afro-Caribbean consciousness, radical politics, popular culture and oral language became a part of the dominant agenda in Anglophone Caribbean literary criticism. In *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, Alison Donnell considers Brathwaite the leading figure of that she calls 'the boom' in Caribbean literature in the 1960s and '70s. This critical tendency promotes 'the need to acknowledge and to affirm popular cultural and oral forms; the need to be mindful of cultural relevance and ownership' (Donnell, 2006, 32). According to Donnell, this agenda moved from the margins to the centre of Caribbean literary criticism and poetic practice during this period, and still represents the dominant tendency in literary studies in the Caribbean. Brathwaite's promotion of 'nation language', poetry and jazz epitomised this project, one that Johnson continued, though in a different, more metropolitan and reggae-inspired context. According to Brathwaite, 'dialect' is a pejorative term when used to describe Caribbean languages. He encourages the term 'nation language', defining it as the kind of English spoken by enslaved people and labourers rather than the official Standard English (Brathwaite, 1984, 5–7; Hart, 2010).

The next influential critical turn in Caribbean literary criticism occurred, according to Donnell, in the 1990s. 'The black Atlantic model', most clearly outlined in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993)*,* theorised a diasporic black culture and identity that was defined as transnational rather than national. Transnationalism has been understood in many different ways in the fields of diaspora studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, but one useful definition in this context is that transnationalism generally refers to a 'social formation spanning borders' (Vertovec, 2009, 4). It is useful to have these two critical moments in mind when we look at Johnson's position within both Caribbean and British literary histories. 'The boom' was initiated by many of Johnson's role models, especially Brathwaite and Gordon Rohlehr. Johnson formed part of the late period of 'the boom' because he became one of the leading nation language poets from the mid-1970s onwards. Yet, Johnson was also part of the Black British cultural movement that instigated the need for a more diasporic understanding of black art and writing. In my second and third chapters, I will show how Johnson explores reggae music and bass culture as transnational communities, respectively.

We can position most of Johnson's work in the gradual transition from 'the boom' of nation language to the transnational black Atlantic model, as is reflected in the transition in his work from 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' to 'Inglan is a Bitch'. As we will see in chapters one and two, Johnson's poetry gradually develops a more confrontational and radical approach across the 1970s, and this was no doubt a result of his writing becoming more self-consciously Black British and less 'authentically' Caribbean. His interaction with the punk movement also played an important role in creating a more hybridised Black British expression.

When considering the wider cultural context that shaped Johnson's work it is useful to distinguish between his immediate local context, and the wider international cultural and

political movements of the time. Although I will here mostly focus on the influence of the Caribbean ex-patriot community in London and the rise of a new Black British intellectual elite in the UK in the 1960s, it is important not to underestimate the influence of the American civil rights movement (Patterson, 1972). An organisation like the British section of the Black Panthers, in which Johnson participated during his youth, was a direct result of the black political mobilisation and activism that happened in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Arguably, Johnson's interest in black literature and his whole project of advocating the value of reggae as an esteemed art form would be inconceivable without the rise of black pride sentiments in politics and music that was taking place at the time, particularly in reggae, soul music, and early spoken word such as that of The Last Poets.

Johnson attended events organized by the Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) during the early 1970s and, in that sense, he belongs to the younger generation of artists who partook in debates organized by the movement (Wheatle, 2009, 36). Founded by Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey in London in 1966, the list of writers, artists, and critics active in the movement included already established names such as C.L.R. James, Wilson Harris, Aubrey Williams, and Ronald Moody. In addition, there were younger voices such as Louis James, Orlando Patterson, Kenneth Ramchand, and Gordon Rohlehr (Walmsley, 1992; La Rose and Salkey, 1972). These individuals came from a wide variety of social and national backgrounds, but they had a common desire to meet and discuss the future directions of the Caribbean arts, both in Caribbean societies and in a European context. Indeed, the movement evidently informed much of Johnson's thought about the relationship between art, language, and Caribbean culture.

Johnson has described his relationship with both Andrew Salkey and John La Rose as a kind of mentor-protégé relationship – they 'both took me under their wing' (Cooke, 2016). He also recalls meeting Samuel Selvon who encouraged him to keep writing. In my first

chapter, I elaborate on the ways in which Johnson's work is deeply influenced by the Caribbean Artist Movement, a group he himself described as 'a movement that sought to create an alternative Caribbean aesthetic to the dominant colonizing canon of English literature'.[14] Here in the introduction, however, I want to emphasise that the Caribbean Artist Movement signals the importance of considering Johnson's relationship with the broader cultural history of Caribbean and black immigration in the UK. The history of CAM itself is incredibly important, but it is also a gateway into understanding Johnson's wide-ranging dialogue with the 'Windrush generation' – that is, the first generation of those who participated in large-scale post-war immigration from the Caribbean to Britain.[15]

John La Rose, a core member of CAM and founder of New Beacon Books, arrived in Britain in 1961. Andrew Salkey, another core member of the movement, came to Britain in 1952 (Walmsley, 1992, 1). Samuel Selvon and Georg Lamming both arrived in 1950, while Stuart Hall came to Britain as a Rhodes Scholar in 1951. The fact that most of them arrived in the years between 1948 and 1961 means that they can all be considered Windrush-generation writers and critics. How should Johnson's work be understood in relation to these first-generation Caribbean immigrants? Firstly, these writers' travels and arrivals provide a broader cultural history in which Johnson's *oeuvre* needs to be read. Secondly, these writers provide us with an important framework for understanding how the category of Black British' writing was slowly constructed, and Johnson's position in that process. Thus, they were also transitional figures who wrote at the intersection between Caribbean and Black British writing (La Rose, 1972). In many ways, Johnson built on and responded to the

[14] Golden PEN acceptance speech.

[15] HMT Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury on 22nd June 1948, bringing the first large group of Caribbean immigrants from Jamaica to the United Kingdom. Empire Windrush was just one of many ships that would transport people from the Caribbean over the next thirteen years. In fact, most of the Caribbean immigration took place between 1955 and 1961, yet, Empire Windrush has become a symbol of Caribbean immigration during this period and marked a turning point in modern British history (Macedo, 2007). The arrival of Empire Windrush is often considered the birth of multicultural British society, and images of the first wave of Caribbean men, including Caribbean celebrities like the calypso singer Lord Kitchener, became iconic images of modern Britain.

conversations that were started by these writers in the field of literature, cultural criticism, and politics (McLeod, 2014, 95).

Throughout the three chapters, this thesis will demonstrate that Johnson is a transitional writer who bridges many of the discussions that these writers initiated. Books like Georg Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954) and Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) voiced the black immigrant experience that Johnson would later explore in poems like 'Inglan is a Bitch': 'mi use to work pan di andahgroun/ but workin pan di andahgroun/ yu dont get fi know your way aroun' (Johnson, 2006, 39). The depiction of the isolated, anxious, yet also young and dandy Caribbean men in *The Lonely Londoners* underscores the many relevant points of contact between Johnson and the Windrush generation (Selvon, 1956). Like Johnson, Selvon depicts the rather bleak and depressing encounter with England that many Caribbean immigrants experienced.

As the second chapter will show, Johnson's poetry, despite its well-known militancy, has a more melancholic undercurrent, and displays social realist sensibilities that it holds in common with these earlier 'Windrush' writers. Certainly, his depressed vision of the black man's experiences of 'Inglan' illustrates both literary and political continuity between the generations. Both his and the earlier generation were primarily engaged with depicting blatant and overt forms of racism and discrimination manifested in unequal living and working conditions for black immigrants. In addition, calypso, jazz, fashion, and nightlife play a prominent role in Selvon's depiction of the urban London experience. Johnson explores similar interests in his depiction of sound-system culture, dub, and reggae. One might therefore argue that the development from the Windrush generation to Johnson's generation is best interpreted as a continuation of many of the same themes, albeit in a different cultural climate and set to a new beat with the shift from jazz and calypso to reggae. It is useful to think of these early writers, as belonging to a jazz-generation, while Johnson

represents a turn towards soul and reggae as defining black cultural forms. As the third chapter will discuss, Johnson's emphasis on the experimental, utopian, and future-orientated aspects of reggae music builds on and develops an important paradigm in black Atlantic music. As I elaborate in the first chapter, if Brathwaite has defined jazz as one of the main features of a Caribbean aesthetic, a focus on the importance of jazz to Brathwaite and his generation of writers furthers our understanding of the importance of reggae to Johnson (Brathwaite, 1967–69, 336).

There are many interests linking Johnson to the Windrush generation, but I want to emphasize the importance of Stuart Hall in establishing a cultural climate in which Johnson's writing could flourish. Hall is another member of the Windrush generation who had a pronounced interest in jazz. As Hall explains in John Akomfrah's documentary 'The Stuart Hall Project' (2013), 'Miles Davis put his finger on my soul' (1.28). Hall was not a member of CAM, but nevertheless remains the Jamaican intellectual who has arguably had the biggest influence on cultural criticism in Britain. Hall played a crucial role in the development of the New Left and his work has been pivotal in the creation and institutionalisation of Cultural Studies (Davis, 2004). Whether or not Hall has had any direct influence on Johnson's work is uncertain, but an indirect influence is indisputable. It is hard to imagine Johnson's writing about Jamaican popular music in *Race and Class* in 1976, and reggae in particular, without considering Hall's prior defense of the study of popular culture. Hall's *The Popular Arts* (1964) and edited volumes such as *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1976) played an important role in developing the study of popular culture and subcultures, including reggae, into a rigorous academic discipline. *Resistance Through Rituals,* which contains articles such as 'Reggae, Rasta and Rudies' by Dick Hebdige and 'A strategy for Living' by Iain Chambers, analyses the racial politics shaping the reception of reggae and soul in the UK. Although never placed in this Cultural Studies context before,

Johnson's article 'Jamaican Rebel Music' (Johnson, 1976), where he makes a case for the poetic value of the dub lyricist, should be considered a piece of critical writing very much in tune with this school of thought.

0.4 Critical Reception and Literature Review

As I have already begun to argue, Johnson explores politics within and *through* his poems. Therefore, this thesis will not only seek to gain a more complex understanding of Johnson's politics. It will also consider how Johnson expands the Caribbean interest in the political ramifications of a poet's aesthetic choices. While there has been robust critique of dub poetry, it has been limited to some extent by an overriding focus on its political radicalism, on the one hand, and an ongoing dispute about its alleged lack of formal qualities on the other (Rohlehr, 1972; Morris, 1997; Bucknor, 2011). Without denying the importantance of both of these sets of debates, they each are built on the assumption that the poems belong to a genre with particular political and stylistic ambitions without actually locating the forms in which these ambitions are expressed. Ian Dieffenthaller points to this tendency to use the term 'dub poetry' without actually defining this genre: 'Like "Black British poetry" the epithet "dub poetry" has been adopted by many in the media as being synonymous with all West-Indian poetry from the 1970s onwards, a situation compound by the inability to agree upon what it is that constitutes a dub poet' (Dieffenthaller, 2009, 115). Dieffenthaller, like Mervyn Morris, argues that we need to reevaluate our preconceptions about dub poetry. In the article 'Dub Poetry?' Morris reminds us of the fact that many dub poets have had problems accepting and feeling comfortable with the term:

> Some of the leading 'dub poets' prefer not to be called by that name. They consider that it limits them or puts them down. They may want to use some music that isn't really black, or to draw on no music at all. They may want to write some poems they would not care to perform. They want the freedom to explore a range of human concerns, and display a range of attitudes (Morris, 1997, 3).

Building on this approach, this thesis's third chapter focuses on dub poetry, or reggae poetry, as a genre by taking a fresh look at Johnson's poems without making presumptions about what dub poetry is or *ought* to express politically. Furthermore, and throughout my readings, I wish to set aside some of the preconceptions about Johnson's radicalism and polemics commonly found in reception of his work, and shift the focus towards a more nuanced understanding of his politics. This allows the thesis to locate the Caribbean perceptual models that Johnson inherits from Brathwaite and the Caribbean Artist Movement within the language and structures of his work. The thesis is less interested in the political statements Johnson has made in interviews, therefore, than it is in exploring how he deals with politics through his poems and in his own critical writing.

Shalini Puri argues in *The Caribbean Postcolonial* that Caribbean literary criticism tends to focus on revolutionary political messages, often overlooking messages that are not obviously subversive (Puri, 2004, 112). Yet, as this thesis will show, Johnson's poetry engages in politics on many different levels, those subtle and implied as well as 'loud' and explicit, such that we can see his work as deeply engaged in a 'politics of aesthetics', according to Jacques Rancière's definition (Rancière, 2004). Rancière distinguishes between politics and *the police order*. The police order is an organizational system or logic that establishes a *distribution of the sensible,* which is the law that divides the community into groups, functions, and positions. According to Rancière, politics takes place when these positions or functions are modified. The *political* is therefore fundamentally relational and dynamic; an intervention in the police order, rather than a specific governmental regime: 'Moreover, politics in its strict sense never presupposes a reified subject or predefined group of individuals such as the proletariat, the poor, or minorities' (Rancière, 2004, 3). Rather than a predefined programme, ideology, or interest group, politics is the process of challenging or 'redistributing' people's allocated position or function in society. I argue throughout the

thesis, but in specific detail in the third chapter and the conclusion, that this definition of politics as the 'distribution of the sensible' is a particularly suitable definition through which to read Brathwaite's writing about Caribbean perceptual models, including his interest in how poetry can shift and modify perceptions and hence create political change. Both Brathwaite, and Johnson after him, are interested in the relationship *between* aesthetics and politics, rather than seeing poetry as a vehicle that conveys ideology without interacting with it.

A survey of Johnson's critical reception reveals that it is dub poetry's traditions of radical resistance, anti-colonialism, and authenticity that are most frequently celebrated. The most cited book about dub poetry, and the first book-length study of the genre, Christian Habekost's *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, presents an analysis of 'Di Good Life', a poem from *Tings an Times* (1991) that was later included in the Penguin *Selected Poems* edition from 2006. Habekost argues that in the 1990s Johnson's poetry became more metaphorical when compared with his earlier poetry, which according to Habekost 'featured a large number of campaign poems and unveiled political messages' (Habekost, 1993, 212). However, 'Di Good Life' is the only poem in *Selected Poems* in which Johnson mentions the word 'socialism' explicitly. Moreover, Habekost's choice of poem is not especially representative of Johnson's *oeuvre*, not even of that produced in the 1990s. In this decade, Johnson also started to write love poems, and he has himself commented that his attitude to poetry has '"broadened" over the years' (Morrison, 2012). Habekost's reading of 'Di Good Life' is markedly negative, and concludes with some disapproving remarks: '"Di Good Life" shows nothing of the pugnacious militancy which once distinguished LKJ's poetry. His allegorical apology for his own ideology sounds like a nostalgic swan-song rather than a radical dub version of the Internationale [*sic*]' (Habekost,

1993, 217).[16] This comment betrays two assumptions that I challenge in this thesis. Firstly, Johnson's earlier poetry is not worthy of critical attention simply because of its 'pugnacious' militancy. Secondly, his poetry should not be evaluated solely in terms of an aspiring radical dub version of 'The Internationale'. The politics of his poetry and his use of Caribbean perceptual models cannot be purely understood within the conventional constellation of ideas characteristic of Marxist criticism.

This thesis therefore argues that Johnson represents a dynamic politics which varies across his *oeuvre*: anti-colonial statements against British domination (explored in the first chapter) give way to assertions of young multicultural British identity (discussed in the second), and then develop through reggae a simultaneously realist and utopian vision of human liberation (as outlined in the third chapter). Throughout, Johnson's politics operate on different levels and displays different ideas at different times, but they are always rooted in his conscious exploration of style and form. Habekost presents Johnson as a poet who has evolved from writing radical political poetry to writing out-dated political poetry. From my perspective, this is a reductive reading of Johnson with a one-dimensional focus that reduces his poetry to a varyingly effective Marxist project. Rather, I will show that reggae lyricism spans everything from dance instruction pieces to election campaign songs. Indeed, reggae deejays as a matter of course cover a wide range of subjects, with revolutionary political lyrics forming only one aspect of this diverse lyrical material. While social commentary has played an important role in this tradition, reggae lyricism has depicted all aspects of everyday life. A great many reggae lyrics, for instance, are about boy-girl relationships. As Johnson has put it, there is just as much '"girl I love you", "boy you treat me bad" and this kind 'a

[16] 'Di Good Life' is dedicated to the memory of C.L.R James and John Holness, two important Caribbean Marxist thinkers. Johnson knew James personally, so the line 'sowshalism/ is a wise ole shephad' might be an elegy about the death of his elderly idealist friend, and not necessarily an apology for Johnson's ideology.

thing. A lot of it is like that'.[17] But if this is so, why does Johnson's inspiration from reggae continue to be read in such narrow terms? Indeed, Habekost's judgement is symptomatic of a general tendency in many critical articles and reviews about Johnson, a tendency that this thesis begins to correct. The reception often emphasises the explicit revolutionary Marxist, socialist, and postcolonial message of his work and reduces the ambiguity of his political beliefs and his poetry's resistance to simplistically expressed macro-ideologies (Freeden, 2003).

Even when Johnson's subtler though politically inflected aesthetic is taken into account by these critics, it is often treated as additional information, an extra dimension, rather than an integral component of his work. Studies of Johnson have tended to emphasise his protest against racism in Britain, his political resistance, and his giving of a voice to the black experience in Britain. The short entries about Johnson in *The Oxford Companion to 20th-century Poetry in English* (Hamilton, 1996) and *The Cambridge Companion to 20th-century English Poetry* (Corcoran, 2007) both share this political emphasis. Outside of these political readings, there have been few examinations of the role of aesthetic experience in Johnson's poetry, and even fewer attentive discussions of his numerous references to reggae and sound-system culture (Johnson, 2006, 14, 7, 17).

Shalini Puri has made a little headway in correcting this view of Johnson's poetry in the article 'Beyond Resistance: Note Towards a New Caribbean Cultural Studies' (2003). There she argues that Caribbean cultural studies have been drawn to voices of resistance and anger in dub poetry: 'What I am arguing is that celebratory critical accounts of dub poetry tend to overstate the security of the political knowledge of the poem's speaker and underread the faltering process of its emergence' (Puri, 2003, 37). The article argues that the work of Johnson and another influential dub poet, Michael Smith, has been read reductively by critics

[17] Classical Reggae Interviews website, online Source: http://classical-reggae-interviews.org/lkj-reg.htm [16.02.17, 21.08].

concerned only to 'uncover or recover a revolutionary or militant popular culture' (Puri, 2003, 33). She continues: 'The critical strategy that makes revolutionary consciousness a precondition for gaining entry into the canon silences significant aspects of Smith's and Johnson's poetry, not least the long octave that spans resignation and refusal' (Puri, 2003, 37). This is an astute observation about the ways in which dub poetry's reception has often been fixated on emphasising its subversive and radical nature. This thesis proposes, however, that is not the emphasis on the political or subversive that is necessarily the most limiting feature of this reception. Rather, it is that the genre's political and subversive attributes have been defined too narrowly. I return to this observation throughout and examine it from different angles in light of Johnson's creative practice as a poet. As emphasised earlier, we need to acknowledge that Johnson and his Caribbean predecessors were and are thoroughly engaged with a politics of aesthetics. Critical reception has thus far failed to take account of this legacy, and to engage fully with the aesthetic dimension of reggae.

In her 2010 study, *Lines of Resistance: Essays on British Poetry from Thomas Hardy to Linton Kwesi Johnson* (Merriman, 2012), Emily Taylor Merriman discusses the relationship between political resistance and aesthetic enjoyment in Johnson's poems. Merriman's reading acknowledges that 'the pleasurable elements of Johnson's art resist the joylessness that plagues people of all races and classes in unjust societies' (Merriman, 2012, 229). However, for Merriman there remains an intrinsic tension between the two:

> The music (usually some form of reggae) that often accompanies Johnson's verse in performance tends to reinforce this hopeful, even joyous vision, but such reinforcement can be problematic, as the relaxed enjoyment of the music easily turns into an end in itself. If and when that happens, the effect is to reduce the quality of mindful resistance that generated the pleasure-giving form in the first place, even while it engenders the very enjoyment which ranks high in Johnson's scale of values. The creatively instigated resistance can be swallowed up in the relatively passive reception of the artistic product (Merriman, 2012, 220–221).

Merriman's fear that musical enjoyment and pleasure will reduce 'mindful resistance' is predicated on a distinction between aesthetics and politics that fails to recognize how interdependent these factors are both in the Caribbean literary tradition and in reggae

culture.[18] In this thesis, I argue that Johnson's use of language and symbolism configures reggae music and poetry (especially its heavy bass and rhythm) as a powerful and violent political force that challenges this opposition between pleasure and resistance. Music does not simply 'accompany' the words, as Merriman reads it; rather, it is built into the language. In this way, the enjoyment of its musicality cannot be separated from the verbal or 'mindful' content. In addition, Merriman is wrong to assume that Johnson's artistic product has a 'passive reception'. As I have begun to intimate, and as I will demonstrate further in the close readings included in chapter three, the experience of bass is a highly physical experience that blurs pleasure and pain. Johnson argues that this 'music embodies the historical experience of the Jamaican masses' and 'he who feels it knows it' (Johnson, 1976, 398). In other words, the music incorporates political resistance. Merriman acknowledges that musical pleasure and enjoyment have an important place in Johnson's poetry. However, she argues that this musical enjoyment is a factor that can potentially interfere with the poetry's resistance and political messages. According to her analysis, enjoyment can be empowering, but is more likely to function as a form of escapism; for Merriman, Johnson's political resistance is to be found in the poetry's explicit political content, but not in the musical beat or groove. Again we are returned to a reductive reading of the political dimension of the dub poetry genre. A critique that remains suspicious that one aspect of the texts will interfere with another reveals that its focus has to some extent been shaped by preconceptions of what the genre should and should not be, rather than by what it actually is and what it actually does.

Dilek Sarikya, in 'The Construction of Afro-Caribbean identity in the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson' (2011), an article drawn from her doctoral thesis about Johnson, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar, provides a further example of how Johnson's image as a dub poet has often been described in predictably political terms. In the article, Johnson's

[18] Merriman also points to Walter Bernhart, who 'argues that the music can actually "destroy" the political message that the lyrics are seeking to convey' (Merriman, 2012, 221).

poetry is convincingly described as 'the communal experience of black diaspora in Britain' (McGuirk, 1998). However, Sarikya then seems to equate the Black British experience almost exclusively with active anti-racism and identity politics: 'Almost all of his poems are devoted to the fight against racism on the one hand, and the effort to construct a distinctive Afro-Caribbean cultural identity on the other hand' (Sarikaya, 2011). Although these are core interests in Johnson's poetry, the poems also explore the role sounds-system culture and reggae culture – in other words music and poetry, or aesthetics – play in the communal experience of Black Britons. The criticism that I have discussed thus far all make important comments about Johnson's political engagement, but they nevertheless exemplify how critical assessments of dub poetry tend to be shaped by its straightforward identity politics, rather than engaging with the subtler politics of its aesthetics. Both of these different critical tangents, as well as the tension between them, needs to be explored as a central component of Johnson's writing.

Similarly, in 'Spelling out Resistance: Dub Poetry and Typographic Creativity' (2013), Manuela Coppola presents an interesting reading of the use of inconsistent spelling within the creole continuum in the work of Johnson and Jean 'Binta' Breeze. Although the article focuses on the formal and linguistic aspects of the work, the conclusions extracted from this formal analysis once again adhere to a conventional political framework: 'By strengthening a sense of identity which resists any pressure for standardization, they promote creativity while freely using and deliberately modifying the colonial orthographic standard' (Coppola, 2013, 18). By arguing that the formal (or aesthetic) features resist the 'colonial orthographic standard', the analysis falls once more into the pattern of conventional postcolonial readings that limit the politics of dub poetry to a reductive, one-dimensional standpoint. Thus, even readings that engage closely with the text – as here, with its linguistic 'trickstery' – the focus on the political use of language is often reduced to a binary, all too

familiar, West versus the rest political schema that is not specific to dub poetry, but that has been applied to almost all non-white or non-European writing (Gikandi, 2004, 99; Ashcroft et al., 2002, 28–33).

Likewise, in ‘Transnational Metamorphoses of African Orality: L.K. Johnson’s Dub Poetry’ (2010), Pierpaolo Martino writes about the role of the bass line in Johnson's poetry, but the emphasis derives, as for the other politicised readings already discussed, from a general argument about postcolonial resistance or subversion, rather than from a thorough understanding of Caribbean aesthetics or reggae’s own belief system: ‘Songs, particularly in the West, are organized according to strictly hierarchical principles. In this sense, reggae and dub’s creative interpretation of the bass stands as an attempt to subvert (Western) conventional norms’ (Martino, 2010). Once again, we find dub poetry’s formal features being reduced to nothing more than a rejection of Western norms. Yet, this provides little insight into how Johnson and other reggae artist incorporate a complex web of cultural and political influences that absorb both western and non-western aesthetic influences. A similarly reductive sentiment is expressed by Susan Gingell in her discussion of Lilian Allen's homage to the work of Louise Bennett:

> Whereas in bringing Jamaican Creole to the page Bennett struggled to overcome the psychological displacement created by colonial language politics in the Caribbean, the younger poet struggles to get home through sound to the ancestral homeland from which she is physically displaced (Gingell, 2009, 45).

Once again, the interesting arguments about the aesthetic aspects of Allen's poetry are explicitly linked to an all too familiar postcolonial framework of colonial displacement, subversion, and homeland. Even if 'postcolonialism' or 'anti-colonialism' cannot be defined as macro-ideologies, they are still major analytical frameworks applied to hugely varied range of cultural production that falls under the broad category of postcolonial writing. Terms like ‘resistance’, ‘subversion’, or ‘radical’ can be useful in decoding dub poetry, but are these generic postcolonial terms, when used in this unspecified way, really doing much to enlighten

us about the politics of dub poetry and reggae? In the thesis, I make the case for terms such as 'Caribbean perceptual models' or 'bass culture', which I will demonstrate offer a more precise description of dub poetry's unique political engagement.

Taken together, the examples I have discussed above are representative of the ways in which dub poetry has often been analysed in binary political terms, with an emphasis either on its relationship to macro-ideologies or other homogenising frameworks. Even its aesthetic aspects are rarely explored beyond the recognisable tropes and themes already mapped out by postcolonial discourse and criticism. However, some chapters and articles in recent years have discussed Johnson's engagement with form, canonicity, and aesthetics. Ashley Dawson's 'Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry and the Political Aesthetics of Carnival in Britain' discusses Johnson's involvement in the carnival movement (Dawson, 2006), while McGill's 'Goon poets of the Black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson's Imagined Canon' examines Johnson's playful critique of the canon and of the literary establishment (McGill, 2003). John McLeod's presents a compelling reading of Johnson's use of fire and Babylonian imagery taken from reggae music in his book chapter entitled 'Babylon's Burning: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie' (McLeod, 2004). Elsewhere, in his chapter 'All Wi Doin': Tony Harrison, Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Cultural Work of Lyric in Postwar Britain', Kevin McGuirk reads Johnson's work through the lens of the lyric (McGuirk, 1998). An unpublished PhD thesis 'The Demands of a New idiom: Music, Language and Participation in the Work of Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite and Linton Kwesi Johnson' analyses the relationship between music and participation in his work (Kohli, 2005). With these contributions in mind, there might be reason to think that the interest in Johnson's formal experimentation has increased in accordance with his rising status. However, it might also be symptomatic of a more general growing interest in theories of aesthetics within postcolonial studies (Boehmer, 2010). The collection of critical essays

'*Black British Aesthetics Today* (Arana, 2007) suggests that there might have been an 'aesthetic turn' in the study of Black British literature in the last ten years; one in which this thesis participates. My study differs from these preceding articles about Johnson, however, in that they often use aesthetics as synonymous with style or form, or do not talk about aesthetics explicitly. Meanwhile, for this thesis, both Johnson, and Caribbean critics more generally, engage with aesthetics as a philosophical field of enquiry related to sensory perception in general.

Considering this interest in the possibilities of Johnson's aesthetics, Michael A. Bucknor's 'Dub Poetry as Postmodern Art Form' develops a productive line of argument to suggest that dub stimulates and encourages new, experimental critical practices*:*

> The early discordant reception of print dub foreshadows the way in which reception would loom large in dub poetry's history, announces some of the larger ideological issues of aesthetic taste and judgement in Caribbean criticism and signals the way it has both forced and facilitated new form of critical practice. By its fierce revolutionary stance on the value and limits of art to a postcolonial society, it also seems to insist on a self-critical, self-aware practice (Bucknor, 2011, 258).

Bucknor argues that dub poetry and its reception have become an important site for discussing some of the large ideological issues concerning the relationship between literature, aesthetics, taste, art, and the postcolonial society. Most pertinently, he argues that dub poetry facilitates new modes of critical practice in a self-critical and self-aware fashion. Bucknor describes the poem 'Bass Culture' as 'meta dub', because it 'reflects self-consciously on the value of reggae music for dub poetry's political activism' (Bucknor, 2011, 262). Calling the poem 'Bass Culture' a meta dub resonates productively with my argument that Johnson's poetry self-consciously discusses the relationship between aesthetic experience and political resistance on its own terms. 'Dub poetry is Jamaica's gift of a new art-form to the literary world', writes Bucknor (Bucknor, 2011, 255). Building on Bucknor's argument, then, this thesis contends that Johnson's poetry is self-critical in nature, and that the poetry itself offers us a critical vocabulary through terms such as bass culture with which to make sense of dub

poetry's political and aesthetic projects.

At the same time, I argue that Johnson is interested in aesthetics defined as ‘sensory perception’ *specifically,* not simply as a term loosely referring to literary form. As Simon Gikandi opines in *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*,

> The possibility, as Lamming asserts in the 1948 introduction to the Pleasures of Exile, lies in the capacity or desire of the colonized “to transform the eyes and ears of the world” through discourse; the corollary to this kind of discursive reveal is a narrative that explodes the colonial vision (Gikandi, 1992, 65).

I agree with Gikandi that Caribbean writers are interested in transforming ‘eyes’ and ‘ears’ – that is, to effect political transformation and intervention by shifting our sensory perception. However, this happens for these writers ‘through’ poetry, literature, and art. Is ‘through *discourse*’ then the best term to describe this process? Georg Lamming brings attention to the limitations of language and the solitude that follows from this in ‘The Negro Writer and his World’:

> It is a moment marked by silence. It is a moment when a man’s utterance cannot catch and convey the shape and shade of his thought and his feeling. Language, it would seem, has actually surrendered just when his need is greatest. It is then he requires this weapon of words to enter that hidden area of his consciousness, and bring back with it, so to speak, the kind of picture which another’s eye cannot conceive (Lamming, 1956, 9).

In this description, Lamming portrays poetic language as something that attempts to represent experiences that are not necessarily verbal, but which are ‘silent’ – such as ‘shade’, 'shape’ and ‘picture’ – perceived by the individual eye and consciousness. For Lamming, words are a powerful ‘weapon’, yet the political potential of literature lies in its ability, and sometimes failure, to give expression to experiences that another ‘eye cannot conceive’. The political intervention of poetry thus happens on the sensory level, through its discursive and linguistic attempts to facilitate this intervention into the way we perceive the world. Discourse is therefore important, but the emphasis on the term ‘discourse’ in Caribbean literary studies implies that all speech acts or enunciations are equally transformative in this respect. This thesis argues, on the contrary, that poetry, art, and music, are seen by Caribbean writers as

exceptional in their ability to affect such political transformations because they privilege sensory experience. Because of this privileging, they can shift perceptual models in a way that more straightforward political or other kinds of discourse cannot (Brathwaite, 1984, 8).

However, there are still some prejudices that hinder us from recognising the achievements and contributions Caribbean literary figures have made, and could continue to make, to not only literature, but to aesthetic philosophy more broadly defined. The following quotation from the article 'Caribbean Aesthetics' in the Oxford University Press' *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* demonstrates the prevalence of such myths:

> Defining concepts such as "aesthetics," "aesthetic expression," "artist," and "work of art" within the socioeconomic contexts of the Caribbean is extremely problematic for several reasons. First, owing to the fact that efforts to distinguish the area from the rest of the world have been quite recent, these concepts, which traditionally suggest universality consistent with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, are infrequent in Caribbean discourse. Caribbean discourse, not organized until well into the twentieth century, tends to refer more to politically and socially committed terms, such as "culture," "cultural expression," "cultural identity," "socio-cultural system," and, more recently, even "Caribbeanness," a concept with nationalistic aspirations that claims for the area a cultural identity and a socioeconomic matrix – the slave plantation – that are more or less shared (Benítez-Rojo and Washbourne, 1998, 341).

Firstly, the article illustrates that aesthetics is often defined as a problematic term in a Caribbean postcolonial context because of its perceived association with Kantian notions of universality. Secondly, the political and nationalist engagement of Caribbean poetry is often defined as 'committed', rather than as engaged with aesthetics as such. This thesis seeks to counter these claims through the case study of Johnson, emphasising that his political 'commitment' and aestheticism are in constant dialogue. Furthermore, it argues that Johnson embraces aesthetic universalism from a black humanist and utopian viewpoint. This shows, contrary to these myths, that Caribbean critics have long been interested in using and exploring the term aesthetics, and might even be said to prefer the terms aesthetics to other similar alternatives such as poetics or literature, because it allows them to talk about literature in the context of other media and as integrated into everyday life. In addition, and as the third chapter of this thesis will discuss in detail, Johnson, who is inspired by Caribbean and African American literary traditions, does not reject universality. He embraces universality

by centring the black subject as the universal human. The idea that Caribbean literature, or postcolonial literature more broadly, *necessarily* takes issue with aesthetic universalism is a common and deeply rooted misreading. This thesis, by studying Johnson's and other Caribbean poets interest in the term aesthetics, provides a case study that speaks to other more general conversations about what a 'Postcolonial aesthetic' might entail, and how the term aesthetics might be viewed and treated more productively within the postcolonial field. Indeed, through this specific case study, the thesis gestures towards the notion that aesthetics has not only been vitally important to many postcolonial writers in the post-war period; more forcefully, it might be argued that aesthetics has perhaps been an even more *self-conscious* preoccupation of postcolonial literature than it has for the mainstream western canon, especially in the cases where it has challenged established and common sense definitions of literature, poetry, or democracy.

In *Modernism, the Visual and Caribbean Literature*, Mary Lou Emery makes the case that vision, the eye, and the 'the power to see', play an important part in Caribbean literature and its politics of vision (Emery, 2007, 10). My argument follows this emphasis on the central role that the senses, the aesthetic, and the synaesthetic have performed in Caribbean writers' ideals of political resistance. This understanding has especial import because of the ways in which people of African descent have historically been excluded from the Kantian understanding of *sensus communis*, an issue I will discuss at length in the third chapter (Kant, 1951; Shiner, 2001) [1790]. My focus on vision is foregrounded when, in the second chapter, I draw on Glissant's notion of *scopic exchange* as a conceptual framework with which to challenge critical readings of the relationship between reggae and punk that are limited to white musicians' gaze on reggae music, whilst ignoring reggae musicians' fascination with punk (Britton, 1999, 23).

However, Emery makes a distinction between the emphasis on sound, orality and

music in Caribbean cultural studies – a recurrent preoccupation of the work of Paul Gilroy, Carolyn Cooper and Kamau Brathwaite – and her own more oppositional focus on Caribbean 'countervisions'. She remains sceptical of Caribbean critics' tendency to emphasise sound because 'they risk replicating colonialist philosophies of discrete, hierarchically organised sensory development' (Emory, 2007, 2). She reminds us that 18th-century philosophies constructed the modern subject as imbued with reason, and that the subject's reason was seen as dependent on man's capacity for sight. Instead of challenging the hierarchical ordering of the senses, she argues, Caribbean critics have often embraced sound at the cost of vision. My reading of Linton Kwesi Johnson's work, and his response to the ideas of Kamau Brathwaite – most notably his synaesthetic term, Caribbean 'perceptual models' – will attempt to demonstrate that Emory's interpretation of these critics leads her to create a false binary. Both Johnson and Brathwaite have preferred the term aesthetics to other more media-specific or sense-specific expressions exactly because it breaks down the hierarchy between the literary and the non-literary, vision, language, and the other senses. In addition, situating these critics alongside other avant-garde artists and theorists reveals that questioning the importance of vision *over* the other senses is in fact a relatively common avant-garde strategy, particularly prominent in Surrealism (Jay, 1993; Bataille, 1979), Therefore, when Emory argues that the emphasis on sound creates an 'opposition to the construction of modernity' (2007, 2), this perhaps obscures the fact that Caribbean writers have also integrated avant-garde, and modern, influences that are not best understood as modern*ism*. This calls for a more nuanced distinction between the influence of modernism and that of the historical avant-garde in discussions of the importance of the senses in Caribbean writing (Bürger, 1984), and I hope that my readings of Johnson's work contribute to these future debates.

To pick up the discussion about why this thesis prefers the term 'aesthetics' over the term 'discourse', the emphasis on the term 'discourse' in Caribbean criticism has, despite the

strong sensory component of the poetry, also coloured the academic analysis of reggae's political potential: 'The movement's [Rastafari] use of Jamaica's popular music suggests that, while music may be an effective medium for popularizing a social movement, it has limitations as a mode of ideological discourse and may make movements more vulnerable to co-option' (King et al., 2002, 108). Furthermore, Habekost describes dub poetry as 'the poetic articulation of political discourse' and as being 'ideologically committed' (Habekost, 1993, 115). I suggest that we should not consider reggae as more or less successful 'ideological discourse', but rather as an aesthetic expression that can have political implications exactly because it differs from conventional ideological discourses. In Johnson's poetry, as I underscore in the third chapter, reggae holds a privileged position because it is able to provide exclusive insight into Jamaica's political history and Black British identity in ways that other more conventional historical documents or facts cannot.

0.5 British Cultural Studies and Conceptualisations of the Politics of Reggae

In this penultimate section of the introduction, it is necessary to briefly outline how 1970s British cultural studies, as developed in the work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Dick Hebdige and Iain Chambers, provides a critical lens that might further our understanding of why dub poetry's co-operation between black music and white subcultures in Britain, not to mention its relationship with other multiracial cultural sources, have to-date been neglected. In so doing, it explains why the thesis contributes some *re-readings* of Johnson's poetry. In my second chapter, I delve into the relationship between Johnson and the punk movement in detail, and in the third, I focus on the dub poetry's universalist message. Presently, though, I wish to situate this thesis in the existing cultural studies scholarship on reggae culture in Britain, particularly with regards to its interpretations of reggae music's role in creating

interracial contact in the 1960s and 1970s. The aim is to highlight how these field-forming interpretations of black music in the UK still shape how we talk about dub poetry in academia today, and to clarify how my thesis builds upon this scholarship, while departing from certain aspects of its more materialist and Marxist paradigms.

Throughout, I propose that the interaction between reggae and punk, as well as other cultural contexts that are not exclusively black, has been under-researched because an opposition was posed between supposedly *authentic* black radical politics and the allegedly *posturing* or inauthentic nature of the white subcultural appropriation of black culture in Britain. At the core of this tendency lies a binary view of black and white culture, and a dogmatic distinction between ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’ politics. Both of these cleavages are questioned in Johnson’s poetry. As I have already begun to suggest, and as I will show in detail, the concept of 'bass culture' challenges the distinction between what we can call ‘real politics’ and the subtler politics inherent in symbolic and aesthetic forms such as reggae. Additionally, as expanded upon in the second chapter, Johnson’s radical Black British poetry incorporates a punk-aesthetic, and this link highlights the limitations of positioning white subcultures in opposition to ‘authentic’ black music (JanMohamed, 1983).

Stuart Hall’s writing is central to the argument and focus of this thesis, not only because he was the first to consider reggae’s and dub poetry’s political implications, but in particular because he pioneered the study of subcultures as forms of political resistance, rather than merely expressions of teenage delinquency. The thesis builds on the basic premise that dub music and reggae (i.e. subcultures) mirror and influence the political landscape. However, it departs from Hall’s focus on macro-ideologies and instead focuses on reggae’s more ‘ism-skeptic’ politics of aesthetics, as I have already begun to argue.

Hall analyses reggae subcultures in the UK through the lenses of Marxist class-struggle, and he measures their failures and achievements within this framework. Hall

demonstrates that within cultural studies, subculture has traditionally been read through the perspective of Marxist materialism:

> There is no "subcultural solution" to working-class youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory miseducation, dead-end job, the routineisation and specialisation of labour, low pay and the loss of skills. Subcultural strategies cannot match, meet or answer the structuring dimensions emerging in this period for the class as a whole. So, when the post-war sub-cultures address the problematics of their class experience, they often do so in ways which reproduce the gaps and discrepancies between real negotiations and symbolic displaced "resolutions". They "solve", but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved (Hall and Jefferson, 1976, 48).

From Hall's Marxist materialist perspective, subcultures will habitually be judged and found wanting politically because they supposedly offer symbolic resolutions to problems that 'at the concrete material level remain unresolved'. According to Hall, subcultures ultimately fail to create the political alternatives they often aim to establish. Subcultures attempt to create political resistance, and he acknowledges this effort, as do I, but he has a pessimistic view of their ability to offer solutions as they ultimately fail to dismantle class-structures. The thesis departs from this emphasis on subculture's 'failure' to reach a *predefined* political end, and sees the politics of subcultures as more flexible, situational, and relational.

Vis-à-vis the lack of critical focus on the interaction between Johnson and the punk movement, this may be as a consequence of a strict materialist interpretation of subculture's political value. For materialists like Hall, the racial interaction taking place within subcultures is symbolic, not resolving real problems of racism in wider society. The interaction can therefore be dismissed as an insubstantial posture that is less worthy of our attention than the 'authentic' black grassroots struggle for real material change that dub poetry is often thought to represent. Consequently, the 'real' grassroots politics of the latter is taken more seriously than the symbolic politics of subcultures. Moreover, the hierarchical ordering of different forms of political resistance positions Johnson's image as the left-wing grassroots activist over that of Johnson the reggae and punk scenester or 'rudie'. In this critical climate, of which Habekost is emblematic, the most 'real' and 'authentic' political voice is the most subversive, and his image as a valid and genuine black community

spokesman becomes the main criterion on the basis of which Johnson is allowed into the field of academic study.[19] As I suggest in more detail in the third chapter, this reading can potentially lock Johnson and dub poetry more generally into the political landscape of the 1970s, and therefore runs the risk of dating the poetry and linking it to a very specific historical moment (Miller, 2013).

Johnson's own essay 'Jamaican Rebel Music', from 1976 in *Race Today*, counters this view by making a powerful claim to subculture's political dimension and music's potential of resisting and 'rebelling' against the establishment:

> The popular music of Jamaica today is a music whose pulse is "the ground-beat of survival itself" […]. A music that is at once violent and awesome, forceful and mighty, aggressive and cathartic. It is a music that beats heavily against the walls of Babylon, that the walls may come a-tumbling down; a music that chucks a heavy historical load that is pain that is hunger that is bitter that is blood, that is dread (Johnson, 1976, 397).

It is this kind of music that 'beats heavily against the walls of Babylon'. Johnson's imagery and sound effects express that music (the aesthetic or symbolic) does in fact intervene in the real and material political world *on its own terms*, often through the senses and through feeling.

In this sense, the concept of bass culture challenges Hall's strict distinction between symbolic and 'real' politics. Hall misinterprets subcultures' often deep engagement with music, which should be understood as an aesthetic experience, as consumption and leisure fixation. Instead, I contend that we cannot make a dogmatic distinction between symbolic and real politics in subcultures precisely because aesthetics plays such a defining role.[20] As for

[19] As mentioned earlier, Shalini Puri argues that Caribbean criticism has often been drawn to voices of anger and resistance (Puri, 2003, 37).

[20] In *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style,* Dick Hebdige asks in the chapter 'OK. It's Culture, but is it Art?': 'How, in the final analysis are we to make sense of subcultural style? One of the more obvious ways is to "appreciate" it in orthodox aesthetic terms' (Hebdige, 1979, 128), elucidated in terms of viewing subcultures as 'at least as good as high art' (Hebdige, 1979, 128). Yet, Hebdige argues that this misses the point, and that subcultures are not 'art of a high degree', but rather something that manifests itself in a broader culture. Hebdige thus asks if we should even link subculture to art, and consequently to aesthetic appreciation. I disagree with this premise, because the term 'aesthetic' does not seek to determine whether some item is or is not objectively art. Reggae and many subcultures are often defined as 'culture', but Johnson challenges this by talking about a reggae 'aesthetic', inspired by a Caribbean aesthetics, in a manner that does not distinguish aesthetics from a broader culture, or more generally, aesthetics from ordinary experience.

the political aspects of Johnson's dub poetry, if we focus on his radical grassroots image and 'black authenticity' but exclude his subcultural affiliation, a narrow understanding of the political in his work – and also what its political contribution has been and might potentially become – is generated.

0.5.1 Hebdige and Chambers: The 'Frozen Dialectic Between Black and White Cultures'

Related to this lack of focus on subcultural networks is the opposition in the critical literature, most notably in Stuart Hall's anthology *Resistance Through Rituals*: *Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, between what has been judged as authentic black reggae on one hand, and a white 'shallow' appropriation of reggae music on the other. I discuss *Resistance Through Rituals* for its core ideas, even if the book now feels somewhat out-dated.[21]Yet many of the ideas expressed there, particularly the antagonism between black and white youth culture, and the separation between 'real' and 'symbolic' politics, are still prominent in authoritative works in cultural studies today and therefore provides relevant insight into the critical tendencies around reggae in academia that have shaped Johnson's academic reception from the 1970s onwards. In order to prove this point and conclude this section, I will identify the critical continuity between the 1970s and more recent thought in cultural studies, by discussing Paul Gilroy's core ideas in *Darker Than Blue: The Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Music* (2010).

In *Resistance Through Rituals*, Iain Chambers' chapter, 'A strategy for Living', is particularly strict in its distinction between 'authentic' black culture and 'inauthentic' white appropriation. On the one hand, he writes, for the black person the ideology of soul 'is a

[21] According to Ross Haenfler, post-subculture theories have tended to take issue with the CCCS's emphasis on resistance. They have often, on the contrary, talked about subcultures as apolitical, hedonistic, and consumerist, representing youth that are more focused on identity and personal fulfilment. The main tendency in subcultural studies at the moment is an attempt to reconcile these two perspectives: 'scholars are finding ways to think about resistance that neither inappropriately cast youth as heroic cultural revolutionaries nor reduce participants' experiences to ineffectual consumerism' (Haenfler, 2013, 50). My emphasis on subcultures as aesthetic/political communities contributes to this effort.

powerful weapon in his strategy for living'. On the other hand, he suggests, 'white appropriation of black music always appears to be more superficial' (Chambers, 1976, 165). Chambers thus makes a clear division between real and authentic black music, and superficial white engagement with it. Chambers exposes his own binary logic when he describes the 'tensions which arise when white youth groups try to ride out the contradictions of appropriating a music that struggles in its very forms against white hegemony' (Chamber, 1976, 165). Black music therefore is presented as resistance towards white hegemony; indeed, rather uneasily, it seems to depend on that supremacy to exist in the first place. Chambers continues: 'Nevertheless, embedded in black culture, in black music, are oppositional values which in a fresh context served to symbolise and symptomize the contradictions and tensions played out in British working class youth sub-cultures' (Chambers, 1976, 166). Black and white music are regarded as *negations* of each other, representing 'oppositional values', and so are explicitly circumscribed into binary positions. It is this indictment of an antagonistic relationship that may underlie some of the reasons why a black radical artist like Johnson has not yet been considered in relation to 'white' punk in a literary context. The assumption is that Johnson becomes less subversive, authentic, and black, since white influence is seen to negate or reverse his supposed black radicalism.

In 'Reggae, Rasta and Rudies', another essay in *Resistance Through Rituals*, Dick Hebdige claims that the shallow nature of white appropriation of reggae in Britain is proven by the fact that white British youth in the seventies was not interested in reggae that was explicitly political. He observes that 'the "Africanisation" (or "rastafication") of reggae [...] militated against any permanently close contact between black and white youth cultures' (Hebdige, 1976, 150). Though Hebdige perhaps expresses a more positive assessment of the relationship between punk and reggae in his later work, his chapter in *Resistance Through Rituals* nonetheless sets out pessimistic and pre-determined judgements on white and black

cultural interaction overall, based on unfounded assumptions and essentialist racial categories. Moreover, the interaction between punk and roots reggae that followed in the years after the publication of the article works against Hebdige's thesis that the 'rastafication' of reggae prevented any close contact between black and white youth culture. We should also take into account dub and roots reggae's evolution, via jungle, into drum and bass, dub step, and multicultural club cultures in Britain in the 1990s.[22] The image Hebdige creates of skinheads as a group of people engaging only superficially with black music, and uninterested in 'real' or 'authentic' black culture, is racially essentialist in a dogmatic way: 'it was all a little artificial – just a bit too contrived to be convincing' (Hebdige, 1976, 150).

Indeed, I would say that the emphasis on artificial white appropriation essentializes the authenticity of black culture and reproduces an idea of inherent black 'realness', authenticity, and intuition, with unfortunate connotations of earlier colonialist and primitivist discourses. The idea that the music of the roots era was 'blacker' than the ska and rock-steady music of the 1960s can also be called into question. Although roots reggae was a subgenre more aware of its African heritage, ska and rocksteady were important expressions of black Jamaican pride in their post-independence moment (10–20 years earlier).[23] We need to remember that this understanding of more or less black forms of reggae is based on common assumptions about the political nature of reggae that have dominated Johnson's critical reception, as the examples provided earlier demonstrate. Critics often neglect his interest in the less explicitly political dimension of earlier forms of reggae, even though he refers to artists like Toots and the Maytals as examples of politically conscious music (Johnson, 1976, 399).

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[22] The documentary *Dub Echoes* (2008), directed by Bruno Natal, is a thorough examination of the influence dub has had on contemporary electronic music.

[23] This sentiment does not reflect the anti-essentialist notions of identity that Stuart Hall promotes in his influental article 'Identity and Diaspora', where he describes idenity as a dynamic process and form of production (Hall, 1990).

Against the categorical and essentialist logics expressed, we should also problematise the more factual or empirical aspects of Hebdige's claim that skinhead and black cultural interaction was superficial or disingenuous. In the *Black Music and Jazz Review* in 1974, Carl Gayle, one of the foremost reggae critics in Britain, considers how the reggae scene in Britain developed in the years between the late 1960s and the mid 1970s. He also features a personal account from a black Jamaican scenester called Fenton who comments on the cultural change from 1967 to 1974:

> Pretty soon you couldn't go to a black house party without finding a gang of skinheads. But amazingly, there was little black/white violence and hardly any resentment. Black and white youth have never been as close as they were in the skinhead era, despite the 'mixing' in the trendier soul scenes nowadays. The skinheads copied the way we dressed, spoke, walked, the way we danced. They danced with our chicks, smoked our spliff and ate our food, and bought our records. Today, four years after the birth of the skinhead boom, the white working class kids in bovver boots, and hedgehog haircuts have disappeared completely from our clubs. Their current heroes (Slade and Bowie) are no longer identical with ours (Gayle, 1974, 17).

What Hebdige describes as skinhead's 'superficial' engagement with black culture is, for Fenton, on the contrary, an experience of *real* closeness between black and white youth, and I will investigate this more closely in the second chapter.

The commentaries of Hall, Hebdige, and Chambers demonstrate that reggae's white reception in the UK was, from the early years of the establishment of cultural studies, met with a somewhat pessimistic response that questioned (and perhaps also minimised) the progressive political nature of these encounters. According to Hebdige, punks embraced reggae for the same reasons that Skinheads rejected it: 'The punks capitulated to alienation, losing themselves in the unfamiliar contours of an alien form […] In this way, the very factors which had dictated the skinheads' withdrawal in the late 60s facilitated the punks involvement a decade later' (Hebdige 1979, 64). The comparison between the 1960s skinheads and 1970s punks suggests that subcultures become problematic in contrary ways, according to Hebdige, *both* when their interaction with black music is based on a safe notion of 'sameness', *and* when it is based on the fascinating encounter with difference. The result is

that white and black cultural interaction are thus condemned to a condition where the binary opposition can never be transcended. Hebdige revealingly describes the relationship in terms of being ‘frozen’, ‘imprisoned’, ‘trapped’, and ‘arrested’ (Hebdige, 1979, 70).

The portrayal of appropriation and hybridity in Paul Gilroy’s work, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010), sets the critical coordinates for chapter two, where I attempt to challenge what I see as a continuity in the strongly binary and pessimistic view of white and black cultural (non)interaction in cultural studies. In the book, Gilroy gives an account of what he comprehends as the fading political voice of African American popular music: ‘African American cultural “software” now circulates as generic Americana’ (Gilroy, 2010, 2). He suggests that black Atlantic cultures’ strong tradition of preserving the political and moral content of the freedom struggle has been neutralised and transformed into a celebration of limitless consumer freedom. Black culture has been absorbed into the capitalist world system, and in certain cases like that of so-called gangster rap, has become mobilised in support of hyper-consumerism and neoliberalism (Gilroy, 2010, 176). Gilroy maintains that although black culture has gained a wide global audience, it has come at a cost, and the latent radical politics that has been an essential part of black Atlantic moral economies has been neutralised.

At the same time, Gilroy concedes that black Atlantic culture’s new global position does, in some instances, manage to challenge essentialist notions of race and racial purity: ‘The change of direction produces a head-on collision with simple-minded ideas of ownership, appropriation, legitimacy, and authenticity, however well-intended they may be. Purity becomes impossible, and hybridity ceases to be the exclusive preoccupation of some imaginary postcolonial elite’ (Gilroy, 2010, 151). Nonetheless, Gilroy's ambivalence towards this global success of African American culture becomes particularly potent when he warns us against what he calls ‘decadent hybridity’. He describes this as an ‘absolute and

irredeemably corrupting intermixture that can only be felt as a loss' (Gilroy, 2010, 151). In its analysis of black culture's global popularity, *Darker than Blue* continues implicitly to sketch a strong opposition between 'pure' radical black culture and its ominous appropriation by others who are not black. Gilroy is undoubtedly not against hybridity *in principle*, but the book does contend that cultural hybridity has proved to be 'decadent' *in practice* because it has counteracted resistance and allowed neoliberalism to dominate.[24]

Nevertheless, Gilroy has always been strongly committed to acknowledging the hybridised nature of both Britishness and 'blackness', and the importance of looking beyond the idea of separate biological races (Gilroy, 1990; 1992; 1993; 2000; 2005). His commitment to this multicultural vision is very clear. One might therefore say that he is only critical of *some* of its manifestations under neoliberalism. Yet, it might similarly be argued that *Resistance Through Rituals* was not disapproving of white and black cultural interaction, only of some of its manifestations within capitalist society. Regardless of these highly analogous idealistic intentions, both works ultimately reveal a binary understanding of race and culture where interactions between races are deterministically condemned to a condition in which they are deemed symbolic, and implicitly irrelevant to real freedom struggles, so long as they happen under an erroneous world system. Gilroy's more recent work, like *Resistance Through Rituals,* in its own way reproduces inflexible distinctions. He separates symbolic resistance – 'the ancient idea that listening and dancing together helps us to break through and out of a world of reified relationships'(Gilroy, 2010, 177) – from the world of 'real' political conditions under neoliberalism where racial categories cannot be transcended. Scholars may overlook interactions like those between Johnson and John Cooper Clarke, which I explore in the second chapter, because the former is not seen as equally relevant and

[24] Robert C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* is a very different yet interesting example of how notions of hybridity have been criticised for their lack of progressiveness: 'Hybridity in particular shows the conncetions between the racial categories of the past and contemporary cultural discourse' (Young, 1995, 25).

legitimate, and due to concerns that shifting the perspective threatens the radical moral essence of a black music that inherently resists 'white hegemony'.[25]

I suggest that Édouard Glissant offers a more productive not to say optimistic framework to understand the political implications of these aesthetic exchanges between British reggae and punk in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Glissant's theory of creolization, and particularly his insistence on the necessity of *scopic exchan*ge between the colonised and the coloniser, provides the theoretical framework that my second chapter engages to investigate how an under-explored relationship – the reggae-punk musical, political, and literary *network* – has shaped Johnson's poetry and persona (Britton, 1999, 23).

Against the binary and racialised understandings of reggae music that we often find in traditional cultural studies' interpretations of reggae, it is also possible to argue, as I do in the third chapter, that reggae asserts a set of *universalist* and humanist values.[26] Reggae discourse firmly expresses the view that Jamaican music can appeal to 'all sufferers' (Johnson, 1976, 399). As I will show, my argument aligns here with Kwame Dawes who argues in his book, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing*, that 'reggae music went international and manages to do so on its own terms largely because of the "universalist" spiritual sentiments that came into reggae from Rastafarianism' (Dawes, 1999, 56). Yet, universalist discourses about aesthetics have been controversial in the field of postcolonial studies. Elleke Boehmer points to this in her essay, 'A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating Upon the Present':

[25] One could of course argue that the lack of focus on punk is not a result of a conscious negative evalution of reggae's white reception, but rather based on a deficit of knowledge among academics of this (to some people) 'obscure' cross-over phenomena. However, this deficit of knowledge still derives from the fact that the narrative about Johnson being a polemical black radical has been dominant. The deciding question is, then, to whom is one narrative more available, and to whom is it 'obscure'? Most people who saw Johnson perform in the 1970s or bought his records were largely familiar with this subcultural context, so why has this context not been absorbed into his academic reception? This introduction has offered perspectives on some of the theoretical tendencies that may help explain some aspects of this either amnesia or deficit of knowledge.

> The Kantian aesthetic also signifies or points to – and this is the area most problematic for postcolonialism – a universality of the judgement of taste. In other words, to experience a subjective pleasure in the beautiful implies at the same time a participation in a universal capacity to experience and then to talk and adjudge of this feeling in a way that transcends cultural-political co-ordinates and determinations (Boehmer, 2010, 172).

Although there has been a reluctance to talk about an intersubjective or 'universal capacity to experience' art, music, and poetry in the context of postcolonial expressions, I wish to challenge this practice by emphasising the universalist belief system we find in what Johnson calls *bass culture*.[27] Certainly, reggae music has had a hugely influential worldwide reception, particularly in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The reception of reggae in Africa is a good example of how reggae, a local Jamaican expression, has travelled and become the preferred expression of freedom struggles in other far-reaching contexts. Reggae was an important part of the soundtrack for the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The country also had its own home-grown reggae stars, most notably Lucky Dube. Bob Marley toured in Africa and performed during Zimbabwe's Independence Ceremony on 18th April 1980, as well as playing in Kenya and Ethiopia in 1979. In addition, Jimmy Cliff and Burning Spear are among some of the many Jamaican artists that have toured in Africa (Falola and Fleming, 2012). For Johnson then, having a white subcultural audience in Britain was not really that surprising when we consider reggae's growing international success and the universalist objectives of Rastafarianism. We also see a universalist sentiment described in Johnson's own critical writing about reggae. Johnson's belief that 'all sufferers' have something 'shared' (Johnson, 1976, 399), speaks to the undividing sentiments in reggae, which has made this Caribbean aesthetic expression inclusive towards, and attractive to, other races and nationalities in the UK and beyond.[28]

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[27] Denis Dutton argues that universal aesthetics has been considered essentialist, and therefore perceived to have elements in common with racist varieties of biological determinism. In addition: 'The rejection of aesthetic universalism, and with it the acceptance of culture as the ultimate determinant of aesthetic value, has also been seen by relativists as a way to oppose the notion of European superiority in cultural value' (Dutton, 2003, 212).

[28] Not all kinds of reggae are inclusive: dancehall, for instance, has a history of extreme homophopia. Roots reggae does, however, have a 'one love' message worth noting in this context, although it is fair to say that these

0.6 Scope and Structure of Thesis

To develop the thesis's main argument – that Johnson's writing continues a Caribbean literary tradition by producing poetry that is specifically Black British – the first chapter, 'Caribbean Aesthetics: Dubbing the Canon', uses discourse analysis to show how Johnson's work is embedded in a Caribbean critical discourse, and particularly draws on the legacy of the Caribbean Artist's Movement (CAM) of the 1960s. To this end, the chapter traces the stylistic and critical influence of canonical Caribbean writers on Johnson's work. It looks at writing by Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Gordon Rohlehr, and Derek Walcott to show how these writers have discussed the concept of a 'Caribbean aesthetic'. The chapter suggests that Brathwaite's concept of Caribbean perceptual models offers a comparative way of approaching how these writers have explored the idea of a Caribbean aesthetic, and to argue further that Johnson both continues and redirects this tradition. Brathwaite, one of the central founders of CAM, appeals for a type of poetry that is truer to the experiences of common people in the Caribbean, and for perceptual models that are less defined by the falling snow, and more by the annual hurricanes (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). He shows how a more authentic Caribbean poetic style can be developed in practice by appropriating T.S .Eliot, integrating Eliot's poetry into Caribbean models so as to make it relevant to the Caribbean experience. Johnson, like Brathwaite before him, also appropriates Eliot into Caribbean poetic paradigms.

Caribbean aesthetics, according to Brathwaite and Johnson's practice of appropriation is therefore not about seeing non-Caribbean art as irrelevant, inferior or less valid. It is rather about believing that the poet should not annihilate the self by simply copying others, but should embrace his/her own positionality and unique cultural perspective. Johnson continues

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two aspects reveal a contradiction in reggae. This contradiction is, I argue, a problematic expression of the two kinds of politics – both identity politics and universalism – that the third chapter will discuss.

this ethos when he integrates his Black British experience into his Caribbean poetry. He demonstrates the importance of incorporating his own perceptual models, instead of borrowing the core tropes of Caribbean poetry. In Johnson's case, the hurricane is no truer to his experience than the snow (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). In this way, the notion of perceptual models and other core debates in Caribbean criticism is crucial to understanding Johnson's thematic and formal shift toward a more specifically British expression, even as he remains a truly Caribbean author. As a result, Johnson's poetry explores the outer boundaries of a Caribbean aesthetic, and shows how Caribbean poetry both is and is *not* defined by tropical tropes. Reading Johnson in relation to the Caribbean canon therefore develops our understandings of both the Caribbean canon and Johnson's artistic contributions.

The second chapter, 'The Black New Wave: Re-reading Johnson's Poetry in its British Contexts', exhibits how Johnson's emphasis on being true to his Black British perceptual models, introduced in the previous chapter, led him to interact with the punk movement and to create a more hybridised form of Jamaican writing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. While the previous chapter focuses on the influence of Caribbean writers on Johnson's work (in terms of lineage), this chapter looks at how Johnson engaged (horizontally) with other poets and equals of his generation, exploring the ways in which he simultaneously continues a Caribbean poetic tradition whilst creating something uniquely British. This is a further example of one of the major paradoxes of Caribbean aesthetics that emerges from the first chapter: it promotes writing rooted in one's own experiences, even when those experiences are no longer in or of the Caribbean. Johnson therefore builds on a Caribbean tradition by creating poetry that represents the Black British experience. The chapter argues that Johnson's and British reggae's interaction with punk and new wave movements was important in constituting a specifically British reggae aesthetic.

The second chapter also reads archival material from music magazines like *NME*, *Black Music and Jazz Review*, *Sounds*, and *ZigZag* to explore and map the interaction between Linton Kwesi Johnson and the punk/new wave movement, particularly John Cooper Clarke. It demonstrates how this interaction sheds new light on more 'British' and local aspects of the poetry: British social realism, anti-Thatcher protest, DIY poetics, and 'hard' anti-fascist rhetoric. In addition, the chapter elaborates how Johnson's image and public persona were constructed within these crossover cultural contexts. The chapter thus argues that exploring Johnson's poetry in relation to 'white British' writing during this period is crucial to understanding his *oeuvre* and how he represents a stylistic shift in Caribbean poetry, while also continuing many of its core approaches. The chapter also suggests that this hybridised aspect of Johnson's writing brings attention to some of the conceptual limitations of talking about a Black British tradition on the one hand, and a 'white British' tradition on the other. Johnson's writing demands a more flexible critical toolkit, and highlights the urgency of creating a new critical vocabulary for understanding the performance poetry/political pop lyricism boom in Britain during this period, as well as its lasting influence.

The third chapter, 'Bass Culture': Dub poetry and the Universal Sufferer' focuses on how Johnson became a founding figure of the genre 'dub poetry', and more generally one of the central intellectuals concerned with the political *and* aesthetic features of reggae music. It argues that Johnson's poetry, influenced by reggae music's complex and sometimes paradoxical ways of viewing the politics of aesthetics, oscillates between, and negotiates, an explicitly 'committed' identity politics and a more disinterested and universalist aestheticism. Through my readings of his poetry, it shows how this tension becomes particularly prominent when considering the role of violence in Johnson's poetry. In the poems, violence is both a metaphor for the power of music and an interpersonal and physical conflict – often, the

distinction between these symbolic and real forms of violence is blurred. The chapter takes in the formal and thematic characteristics of the genre 'dub poetry', and compares Johnson's work to that of his contemporaries and those influenced by his work, such as Michael Smith, and Jean 'Binta' Breeze. Johnson's poetry, and dub poetry more generally, attempts to locate its speakers in terms of gender and class, whilst also dealing with Jamaican identity and reggae culture. Yet, like many other reggae artists and poets, Johnson believes that reggae music has a universal message. As such, the chapter explores how Johnson's poetry deals with the relationship between the very local, such as Brixton or Railton Road, and reggae's ability to transcend these cultural markers through its emphasis on immediate sensory perception.

While the second chapter emphasises how Johnson's poetry appealed to a white punk audience in the UK, the third chapter contemplates how reggae music generally, and dub poetry specifically – as defined by Johnson – is often aimed at an even wider audience. Reggae ultimately wants to appeal to 'global' audiences and speak to 'all sufferers'. Johnson conveys this universalism in particular through his emphasis on prophesy, warning, and eschatology. Johnson's poetry is filled with the tension of wanting to *represent* a particular and specific voice, be it Caribbean or Black British, the working class, male or female, while also believing that the message of reggae transcends these categories and has a humanist message. Therefore, this thesis will conclude, Johnson, like his Caribbean predecessors with their emphasis on Caribbean perceptual models, believes that the specific concerns of the Caribbean are a starting point from which to address universal experiences.

1. Caribbean Aesthetics: Dubbing the Canon

> In a sense, what I've been doing with reggae, what I call reggae poetry, is to consolidate that revolution that was started by Brathwaite in terms of the language and in terms of the aesthetics (Gross, 1997).

Upon receiving the Golden PEN Award in 2012, Linton Kwesi Johnson emphasised in his acceptance speech that he saw himself as a child of the Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM), 'a movement that sought to create an alternative Caribbean aesthetic to the dominant colonizing canon of English literature, an independent aesthetic rooted in the history, culture, languages, and oral tradition of the Caribbean peoples'.[29] By calling himself a 'child' of the artistic movements that attempted to create a Caribbean aesthetic, Johnson suggests that he should be considered an important conveyer of CAM'S critical and artistic legacy. This chapter analyses Johnson's attempt 'to consolidate the revolution started by Kamau Brathwaite', as quoted in the epigraph, and argues that his relationship with Brathwaite is crucial to understanding his position in the Anglophone Caribbean canon. In what follows, Johnson's engagement with Brathwaite and CAM will be depicted as key to comprehending Johnson's dialogue with the wider Caribbean post-independence canon, as well as to how he refocuses many core discussions about Caribbean aesthetics from a specifically Black British perspective in poetry in the late 1970s and early '80s.

In order to unpack the critical Caribbean lineage in which Johnson situates himself, I will read Johnson's work alongside that of Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, and Gordon Rohlehr. By comparing the work of this selection of writers, and demonstrating their relevance to Johnson, I will show that Brathwaite's and CAM's core ideas about a Caribbean aesthetic, to which Johnson responds, are also central to understanding Johnson's relationship with canonical Caribbean writers who were not actively

[29] Acceptance speech available on youtube. Online source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz1UlcTt7LM [23.05.17, 19.45]. The quoted statement is at 1.04.

involved in CAM. Indeed, Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott attempted to answer many of the same questions and concerns as CAM in the 1960s and '70s across their *oeuvres*, especially around how to define a Caribbean aesthetic. To the young Johnson, Brathwaite and CAM provided, as this chapter will demonstrate, a bridge into broader and more far-reaching Caribbean literary and intellectual traditions. To demonstrate the continuity between Johnson and the Caribbean literary canon, I will use discourse analysis, here defined as 'the study of language in use' (Gee and Handford, 2012, 1). I will attempt to identify patterns in how Caribbean poets have defined a Caribbean aesthetic by not only analysing poetry and literary criticism, but also by interpreting the meaning and significance of events, conversations, networks, and interviews, and their relevance to identifying such patterns. The core argument of this chapter is that Kamau Brathwaite's concept of Caribbean 'perceptual models' describes a unifying tendency in how Caribbean aesthetics have been discussed by Johnson, as well as by the selection of Caribbean poets and critics analysed in this chapter. The concept of Caribbean 'perceptual models' helps us to better navigate Johnson's position within the Caribbean canon, as well as how Johnson expands and challenges some of its paradigms.

Kamau Brathwaite, considered one of the major voices in the Caribbean literary canon, and a leading contributor to the study of the African diaspora, was born Edward Brathwaite in 1930 in Bridgetown, Barbados. In 1971, he took the middle name Kamau while a fellow at the University of Nairobi, in Kenya. He went to school in Bridgetown, before receiving a scholarship to attend Pembroke College at Cambridge University in 1949 to study English and History. During this time, he became associated with the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme in London. He worked as an education officer in Ghana in the late 1950s, before returning to London and establishing CAM in 1966 (Brown, 1995; Paul, 2007; Savory, 2011 b; Reiss, 2001). Brathwaite's travels between England, Africa, and the

Caribbean, which he undertook before spearheading CAM, capture in many ways the various cultural sources and traditions he would combine when developing his theories about nation language poetry.

In *History of the Voice* (1984), Brathwaite criticises the emphasis on English literature in the Caribbean school system and calls for poetry that is truer to the experiences of ordinary people in Caribbean societies. Caribbean children would read George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Shakespeare, but Brathwaite argues that this literature had very little to do with non-European environments and experiences. Caribbean children would know more about English kings, queens, and the Sherwood Forest than they would the Nanny of the Maroons. They would, Brathwaite writes, be 'more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling snow – than of the force of the hurricanes which take place every year' (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). He encourages Caribbean writers to find perceptual models with which they might produce writing more closely related to local phenomena: 'The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm, which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?' (Brathwaite, 1984, 10).

Brathwaite does not define the concept 'perceptual models' in great detail, nor elaborate on its meaning. I will therefore take a moment to explain what I understand to be its implications, and to build it into a robust critical model that can be used throughout the thesis. I understand perceptual models, on the basis of Brathwaite's writing and poetry, as synaesthetic templates or guides for writings that are selected from the writer's everyday environment. The hurricane, for example, becomes a model for rhythmic, visual, and rhetoric choices. A perceptual model can function simply as a motif, or a direct representation. However, a poem can take inspiration from the properties of a perceptual model such as a hurricane, yet without actually representing it in a traditional mimetic sense (although it can

be seen as a more expressive form of mimesis). As we will see, Caribbean poets often use Caribbean perceptual models in one or both of these ways.[30]

In this way, Brathwaite's term helps us to recognise how Johnson's writing conforms to paradigms of Caribbean intellectual thought: the concept of perceptual models ties poetry to everyday perception and highlights the political potential in insisting on voicing one's own senses and experiences. The concept, with its aesthetic and political implications, provides a theoretical framework with which to understand what I contend are the core creative convictions that emerge in post-independence Caribbean poetry, but especially in Johnson's work: an interest in the authenticity and truthfulness of voice, and a belief that voice should be rooted in one's own individual experiences and environments. As the chapter shows, Caribbean aesthetics have consequently not only been typified by a set of recurring themes and tropes. More importantly for this thesis's exploration of Johnson's Black British reworking of Jamaican oral poetry, Caribbean aesthetics has equally been typified as a *method* and *approach* to writing poetry suited to the environment in which it is written. I will also show how this approach is expressed through some concrete textual strategies such as the use of appropriation and juxtapositions of high and low culture.

Therefore, this chapter lays the historical and theoretical foundations for discussions throughout the remainder of the thesis about why and how Johnson's poetry both evokes and expands our concepts of a Caribbean aesthetic. Johnsons's poetry exemplifies a Caribbean aesthetic because it combines recognisable Caribbean tropes, such as nation language, with new elements that are a result of his unique individual environment, such as the urban landscape of Brixton and the sights and sounds of punk and new wave. As a result, Johnson's Caribbean aesthetic is not only a product of his engagement with Caribbean language and culture; it is also paradoxically formed through a rejection of certain Caribbean conventions

[30] Brathwaite also emphasises that the poet has to use formal innovation to be able to describe the hurricane (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). The environment inspires a form of writing, but poetry also evokes this environment through language.

in favour of the inclusion of Black British ones. Key here is to understand that Johnson *continues* a core paradigm of Caribbean literature even as he creates a specifically Black British reggae expression. It is the combination of recognisable Caribbean themes, and new elements rooted in his individual voice and location – his perceptual models – that truly marks out Johnson's Caribbean aesthetic.

Interestingly, CAM's location in London shows that the movement's disquisitions about Caribbean aesthetics were always contending with the paradoxical nature of literary Caribbeanness. Integral to the movement was the question of what a Caribbean aesthetic could mean not only to those living in the Caribbean, but also to those who found themselves geographically and culturally outside of the region. CAM regularly explored the Caribbean from a geographical distance, and the movement was deeply concerned to help shape the identity of future generations of Black Britons.[31] Still, in contrast to Brathwaite's Barbadian and Oxbridge upbringing, Johnson was part of the second generation of Caribbean immigrants who grew up in Britain and had to define a specifically Black British identity for themselves. Alison Donnell eloquently describes this process of transition from first to second generation as a shift from the sense of being black *in* Britain to *being* Black British. She also identifies within this generational shift a move from primarily focusing on the rights of black people (internationally) to a focus on the representation of black people within the British nation (Donnell, 2002). As the introduction to this thesis suggested, Johnson's poetry operates within this nexus, responding to and becoming an engine of this shift.

Johnson came to England at the age of eleven. In London, he lived with his mother in Brixton (Morris, 1989, 250). The streets and post-industrial city in Johnson's poetry therefore replace Brathwaite's emphasis on the typical Caribbean imagery of the beach and sea: 'night

[31] As Louis James writes: 'The crisis of identity that now faced a generation of British-born West Indians, also living within but apart from English culture, was CAM's concern. This proved true, and the special double issue of *Savacou*, "Writing away from home" (published in 1974 but three years in the editing) is now recognised as the first anthology of Black British literature' (James, 2003, 212).

number two doun at Shepherd's/ right up railton road' (Johnson, 2006, 7). If we consider that the beach and hurricane offered an alternative to European perceptual models, we might say that Caribbean poetry comes strangely full circle when Johnson puts the streets of London at the centre of his poetry. For Johnson's generation, Brathwaite's hurricane was more alien than the snow. Johnson describes instead 'grey clouds/ against a sombre winter sky', observing 'how the sweet smelling blossoms of spring/ are soon become the icy arrows of winter's sting' (Johnson, 2006, 83). The islands were no longer the natural perceptual model or environmental experience for people whose parents had emigrated from the Caribbean.[32] This new urban environment in London and the rise of a Black British identity called for the development of new perceptual models for Caribbean poetry, especially migrant Caribbean poetry. In this move towards Black British expressions in Johnson's work, we discern one of the main paradoxes of a Caribbean aesthetic that becomes particularly evident through a comparison with Derek Walcott: that is, Johnson's identity as a Caribbean poet embedded in a Caribbean aesthetic is combined with his unwillingness to merely reproduce 'pure' Caribbean expressions. This paradox leads to his status as a transitional figure and a mediator between the first generation of Caribbean immigrants and those who identified as being Black British.

In addition to being a Londoner, and weaving the Black British experience of the 1970s and '80s into Caribbean poetry's ongoing attempts to locate more relevant and truly environmental perceptual models, Johnson played a crucial role in bringing reggae from the periphery to the centre of Caribbean poetry. Regardless of whether one thinks of Johnson as the devoted 'child' of CAM, as he claimed in his Golden PEN speech, or as an unruly

[32] Since Johnson refers to 'Rhythm tropical electrical storm' in 'Reggae Sounds' (Johnson, 2006, 17) and 'awftah di pashan a di hurricane' in' Hurricane Blues' (Johnson, 2006, 84). I am not claiming that tropical imagery is completely absent from his work, but that it is much less frequent, prominent and defining of his style than his depictions of urban London. Hence, I argue that Johnson largely moves away from this tendency when we consider the totatity of his expression. This point is underscored in Chapter 2 when I discuss Johnson's explicit declaration that he wanted to make *British* reggae. Of importance, however, is the fact that he roots his writing in Caribbean models like nation language and Reggae, while also incorporating British models.

younger member, he stands in a productive and dynamic relationship with this older generation of Caribbean writers. Johnson showed that the Caribbean poet's quest to find even more relevant, more environmental, and timelier perceptual models was a continuous and always ongoing *process*. This process was, I argue, further related both to Johnson's location in urban Britain, rather than in Brathwaite's Caribbean, and to his interest in *contemporary* music such as reggae rather than, as for Brathwaite, jazz.[33]

The writers discussed in this chapter differ in nationality and status, holding varying degrees of prestige within the Caribbean and postcolonial canons. Nonetheless, the combination highlights that the pursuit of finding a very broadly defined Caribbean aesthetic is central to the concerns of a wide spectrum of Caribbean literary critics, writers, and artists. The grouping of these poets and other writers also demonstrates that the critical engagement with the importance of aesthetics within a Caribbean literary context transcends the Anglophone/Francophone, the high/low, and writer/critic divides that might otherwise be said to internally differentiate Caribbean writing. Defining a Caribbean aesthetic is a topic of engagement that reaches out to many areas of Caribbean writing, and the term itself allows for an overview of some of the wider cross-national and cross-generational critical currents and debates in Caribbean writing. This set of writers has been selected for this study because they explicitly and *self-consciously* engage with Caribbean aesthetics as a concept. In other words, these writers take part in a self-reflexive critical discourse in which the term aesthetics is frequently deployed when describing Caribbean literature, as well as implied or hinted at in various subtler and less obvious ways.

Emphasis on perceptual models that reflect the Caribbean environment in fostering one's own individual poetic voice reveals how aesthetics, or, as I evince, sensory perception, is tied in Caribbean writing to larger, transnational questions of political agency and

[33] For more on the evolution from jazz culture to reggae culture in London, see Lloyd Bradley's *Sounds Like London: 100 Years of Black Music in the Capital* (Bradley, 2013).

autonomy. It is worth noting that this emphasis on the environment in Caribbean literature has often been read through the perspective of ecocriticism and ecopoetics (Savory, 2011 a; Deloughrey et al., 2005). Although my readings will point to the importance of the environment in Caribbean poetry, and particularly tropical tropes (Dash, 1998, 21–40), it is not primarily engaged with the literary depiction of evnironmentalist ethics, globalization, tourism, or the environment defined as a kind of nature or wilderness. Rather, my readings underline how Caribbean poets attempt to centre their *own* sensory perception; that is, their own aesthetic experience of their environment *and* art in their work. Alexander Baumgarten's definition from 1750 of aesthetics as sensory perception (Hammermeister, 2002, 8), which I draw on throughout, makes it less useful to distinguish between nature and artifice. Rather than exploring their appreciation of nature or ecology as such, the chapter explores how Caribbean poets attempt to give a true rendition of their own positionality, voice, and perspective by moving away from European and other hegemonic perceptual models – and as a result, they therefore sometimes paradoxically also move away from conventional Caribbean ones, as the case of Johnson suggests. The term perceptual models can refer to natural environments and landscapes, but as we will see in my interpretation of Johnson's depiction of urban London, it can also refer to urban environments so long as they reflect an authentic Caribbean experience. Throughout, I use the term 'environment' to refer to an author's surroundings, not necessarily synonymous with the concept of 'nature'. This is apposite: Glissant, for instance, uses the plantation society and the boat as Caribbean perceptual models that inspire a particular kind of thinking and writing. Yet, the boat or the plantation is a part of his Caribbean environment defined as surroundings, not the environment defined as nature or fauna (Glissant, 1997, 5, 63).

Although comparative approaches are central to this chapter's argument, it is important to stress that I do not attempt to give a definitive or exhaustive answer to the question of what

a Caribbean aesthetic might entail. This would be beyond the scope of any thesis, especially if it were to respond to the many national, social, and linguistic variations found in the region and its diaspora. The aim of this chapter is, more modestly, to show that Johnson belongs to a critical tradition that has *attempted* to offer some suggestions about what a Caribbean aesthetic might entail, especially in the period since colonial independence. I will identify some tendencies that can be deduced from these attempts, and show how they can help us gain further insight into Johnson's work. Nevertheless, I want to make clear from the outset that this chapter offers suggestions, experiments, and preliminary statements, and a few definitive answers to what a Caribbean aesthetic might look like. The experiments and discussions in this chapter will nonetheless contribute to the overall claims that the thesis makes about Johnson.

Importantly, Johnson belongs to a tradition that has not been afraid to use the ambitious and essentialising term 'Caribbean aesthetic'. The term is essentialising because it implies that all – or at least large segments of – Caribbean art have some features in common. In fact, the attraction of the term to writers and artists like Johnson would appear to have been precisely its apparent essentialism and generality. This attraction needs to be taken seriously, despite the problems that it raises. Caribbean writers' genuine interest in exploring this fraught and difficult concept is something with which we have to engage, even though their discussions often operate at a high level of generality. As we will see, this generality has an important function because it allows these writers to formulate, in broad terms, tendencies within and characteristics of Caribbean writing that extend beyond a national or genre-based framework. Furthermore, only this level of generality allows Caribbean poets to explore the importance of sensory perception to poetry and to politics.

Generality aside, Brathwaite's achievement, which underlies his influence on Johnson and generations of Caribbean writers, is that Brathwaite's aesthetic/political rebellion is not

an obscure ideological critique, in which the critique is an end in itself. Instead, it is intended to be a method and approach practised in the process of writing and in the making of aesthetic choices. This becomes evident when he compares the rhythms of Shakespeare with the rhythms of the kaiso of calypso: 'In the Shakespeare […] the voice travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming movement of the first line, we have a distinct variation. The voice dips and deepens to describe an intervallic pattern' (Brathwaite, 1984, 17).[34] Brathwaite does not simply assert that Caribbean writers should rebel against the forms of Shakespeare while interacting with his work; he pedagogically suggests which alternatives they could use instead and explains how they are different. He also picks interesting features, such as kaiso, from the Caribbean tradition and validates the quality of these alternative forms. Most saliently, he explains why this aesthetic shift in rhythms is simultaneously a political statement. In this way, Brathwaite offers Caribbean poets tangible and concrete Caribbean perceptual models – in this case, Kaiso – that offer the possibility of effecting political and aesthetic changes. This also shows that a Caribbean perceptual model does not have to be derived from a landscape or natural phenomena, it can also be local music and artistic expressions. Johnson continues this project when embracing a specifically Black British reggae aesthetic in order to give voice to a young Black British identity in the 1970s.

My second and third chapters elaborate on aspects of this 'giving voice', building on the present chapter's consideration of the theoretical and historical basis for Johnson's stylistic shift. In what follows, I begin by looking at how CAM in the 1960s centred discussions about aesthetics in Caribbean poetry, and I propose that Johnson's work is the first to outline the full scope of CAM's aesthetic and its implications for poetry. By looking at the topics of the first CAM meeting in 1966, I demonstrate how Brathwaite shifts the

[34] Kaiso refers to the West-African origins of Calypso. For more on the African roots of Calypso see Shannon Dudley's *Carnival Music in Trinidad: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Dudley, 2004).

definition of aesthetics in the Anglophone Caribbean from focusing on quality and beauty to a more pragmatic exploration of sensory perception and form in general. Following on from this, the chapter argues that many of Brathwaite's ideas about Caribbean perceptual models, and particularly his emphasis on *voice*, were developed in dialogue with the work of T.S. Eliot. I then explain how Johnson formulates his own view of poetic voice in a trialogue with Brathwaite and T.S. Eliot. This triangular conversation reveals that Johnson addresses himself to core discussions about the role of voice in poetry in *both* the Caribbean and western 20th-century modernist canon.

However, we cannot claim that Johnson's writing continues some of the core discussions about a Caribbean aesthetics, or define Brathwaite's writing about voice as characteristic of Caribbean writing at large, unless we identify and locate similar tendencies in the work of other Caribbean writers. I therefore also explore how Brathwaite's emphasis on Caribbean perceptual models can be used to explain the focus on the Caribbean landscapes and environment in the work of Glissant and Walcott. I show that Johnson, by trying to create a Caribbean aesthetic, and particularly because of his emphasis on creolization, appropriation, juxtaposition and authenticity, enters into dialogue with these writers, sharing a set of concrete commonalities with them. Finally, I close by returning to the CAM in order to explore the importance of the writing of Gordon Rohlehr for dub poetry in conversations about Caribbean aesthetics. This indicates how dub poetry has inspired more general observations about perception, taste, and form in Caribbean poetry. In addition, Rohlehr helps us to see how Johnson's dub poetry can be placed on an aesthetic continuum between modernist and 'folk' forms, as he creates a hybrid between urban and rural sentiments in Caribbean poetry. Ultimately, it becomes evident that Johnson's poetry participates in some of the core paradigms of post-independence Caribbean poetry. It is only by acknowledging this lineage that we can fully understand the significance of Johnson's

emphasis on creating a specifically Black British reggae aesthetic, an issue taken up in the second chapter.

1.1 The Caribbean Artist Movement: 'Dialogue on the WI Aesthetic'

The legacy of the Caribbean Artist Movement is essential to understanding Johnson's work. This is not only because of what the movement says about what Caribbean art should look or sound like, or how it should be read. CAM has also been highly influential because it tried to conceive of a Caribbean aesthetic that moved beyond the hegemonic positioning of a particular style or content over another, and beyond the local variations within the Caribbean diaspora. Johnson's and other Caribbean writers' generalised focus on approaches to writing is in fact itself one of the main characteristics of a Caribbean aesthetic in the wake of CAM. The tradition emanating from CAM defines Caribbean approaches and principles of art-making as much as it attempts to define the appropriate content or style of Caribbean art.

Johnson first encountered CAM at the Keskide Centre in 1972. He had been invited to the CAM meetings by John La Rose, whom he had met at the New Beacon Books bookshop when he was searching for titles for a discussion group he had helped to set up at the Brixton youth club. Johnson recalls how inspiring these meetings were 'as a young person discovering that there was such a thing as black literature, as Caribbean literature' (Walmsley, 1992, 298; Stewart, 1993, 73), and he soon became involved in CAM as a volunteer, working for the movement as a librarian. He eventually also contributed to the staging of their dramatic productions. When Johnson calls himself a 'child' of this movement, then, it highlights the 'familial' or genealogical lineage between Johnson and CAM through which he pays homage to a whole generation of Caribbean writers. Significantly, Michael Eldridge argues that CAM was the first self-conscious attempt at creating a black public sphere in Britain (Eldrige, 1997, 35). CAM's importance to Johnson

should therefore not be reduced to the influence of any single writer or mind.[35] The Movement represented a much larger growing collective awareness of black and Caribbean literature in Britain that was more influential as a group than any of its individual parts, a legacy to which Johnson's words in this chapter's opening epigraph testifies. The influence of CAM on Johnson's work is thus best understood as a wide-ranging body of unified, albeit different, ideas with which he established a dialogue. As this suggests and as I have already argued, CAM represents the point of contact between Johnson and the wider post-independence Caribbean literary canon and its core texts. [36]

The implicit ideology or shared view of Caribbean aesthetics among CAM members, as Anne Walmsley notes, has not yet been properly extracted and analysed.[37] Speaking of her own documentary history of this time, she hopes that it will:

> provide information and a framework from which others may write the many related studies that CAM stimulates and abundantly deserves. Such studies might well include a detailed look at the work of leading CAM writers and artists in order to establish whether there was indeed an implicit ideology, a shared Caribbean aesthetic (Walmsey, 1992, XIX).

Walmsley rightly points out that although the movement itself never created a coherent programme at the time, it is necessary, in virtue of its major influence on later Caribbean and Black British writing, to identify the similarities that they themselves might not have been able to see. Stuart Hall describes CAM as the 'first wave' of post-war Black British diaspora artists (Hall, 2006). This categorisation demonstrates that the movement represents the beginning of an ongoing tradition of post-war black arts in Britain. Nevertheless, it is difficult to formulate a consistent and unified view from the many different perspectives of the members and their numerous meetings, letters, and documents from the 1960s, unless we

[35] For more on Brathwaite's communal ideals for CAM see Anne Walmsley's 'A sense of Community: Kamau Brathwaite and the Caribbean Artist Movement' (Walmsley, 1995).

[36] In 1968, Brathwaite described the Movement as a co-operative and he emphasised that it was meant to reach a reading and writing audience as broad as possible: 'News of the group spread rapidly along the gravepine; and from seven the movement grew to twelve to twenty and by February 1967, when we held our first public meeting, we were fifty strong and an audience of over a hundred' (Brathwaite, 1968, 58). This demonstrates that the Movement was a centre for debates about Caribbean arts, relevant to writers beyond a small circle of members.

[37] Anne Walmsley wrote this in 1992, but I argue that the claim is still relevant today (Walmsley, 1992).

take into account the movement's wider cultural context and retrospective cultural importance. In fact, a recognisable programme or ideology might emerge only when we analyse the movement via its later reception and re-actualisation in poets like Johnson. I would in fact argue that Johnson is one of the poets who comprehend the full scope of CAM's aesthetic project for the first time.[38] It is through the perspective of younger poets like Johnson, and what Hall describes as the second wave (those born in the 1950s and '60s) and third wave (works produced in the 1990s onwards) of Black British arts that we can recognise what Johnson describes as the revolutionary and field-forming nature of the movement.[39]

Although CAM comprised of many different voices at the time, they have retrospectively been perceived as representative of a solid and coherent legacy of black arts in Britain. Kobena Mercer describes CAM as a 'a starting point for the "homework" which visual studies has yet to catch up in terms of researching the distinct art-historical milieux out of which Asian, African and Caribbean artists in Britain crisscrossed paths with various critical modernisms' (Mercer, 1999, 61). The history of CAM's reception among younger visual artists and poets like Johnson makes it important to understand what CAM and its 'art historical milieux' represents today. We cannot comprehend Johnson's poetry if we do not identify the core ideas and values that Johnson picks up and responds to when citing CAM as an influence. My core argument throughout this chapter is that Brathwaite's idea of Caribbean perceptual models is the concept that best captures the critical legacy of CAM as it influences Johnson's work.

[38] Hal Foster argues in 'What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde' that the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s 'comprehended' the historical avant-garde 'for the first time' (Foster, 1994, 16). Foster proposes that the project of the historical avant-garde could not be perceived as fully formed until the neo-avant-garde repeated some of its approaches. In a similar way, we can say that CAM's project first comes to fruition and therefore becomes fully visible as such an ambitious project when a poet and performer like Johnson starts to revisit its ideas and debates.

[39] Stuart Hall questions whether the third wave is in fact seperate from the second wave, or whether it is an extension of the postmodernist and multi-media aspects of the latter, exhibited, for example, in the work of Sonia Boyce (Hall, 2006).

One of the Caribbean Artist Movement's first private meetings was held on the 6th January in 1966.[40] The title of the event, suggested by Orlando Patterson, was 'dialogue on the WI aesthetic' (Walmsley, 1992, 51; Brathwaite, 1968). Tellingly, the movement placed the topic of Caribbean aesthetics at the heart of its activity from the outset. Kamau (then Edward) Brathwaite was one of the founders of CAM alongside Andrew Salkey and John la Rose (Courtman, 2008, 235). Although it is important to remember the collectivist spirit and generation-defining nature of CAM, in this chapter I pay particular attention to the writing of Brathwaite because it arguably sums up and reflects the main tendencies of the movement as a whole (James, 2003). Towards the end of this chapter, I will also look at the writing of Gordon Rohlehr, another critic associated with CAM. Although Glissant and Walcott were not members of CAM, and were not present at these early CAM meetings, they responded to many of the same questions as those grappled with by CAM members. Brathwaite's writing about Caribbean aesthetics from the 1960s onwards must therefore be recognised as an attempt to suggest answers to a set of questions that occupied the minds of many of his Caribbean contemporaries.

Orlando Patterson's paper on 6th of January in 1967, the only talk successfully recorded and transcribed from the first public CAM meeting, was revealingly titled: 'Is there a West Indian aesthetic?'. Anne Walmsley describes Patterson's contribution thus: 'He was eager for dialogue with fellow West Indian writers about the *aesthetic* which should determine his own concept and practice of fiction as a sociologist' (Walmsley, 1992, 52, my emphasis). According to Walmsley, Patterson explained to the audience that there were certain definitional challenges implied in any attempt to define a Caribbean aesthetic:

> in seeking to find "the aesthetic standards by which we are to judge Caribbean arts", it is necessary first to question whether the concept of "aesthetic", based as it is on Western European Christian art, is appropriate to the Caribbean. "We must begin", proposed Patterson 'with recognition of the basic facts of our cultural background" (Walmsley, 1992, 52).

[40] CAM's first public reading was held in 1967 (Walmsley, 1992; Brathwaite, 1968).

Here Walmsley places the concept of aesthetics at the root of CAM's project; she also emphasises that these explorations have been directly tied to how the term 'aesthetics' should be understood, especially when there are European definitions that conflict with Caribbean interests. In his paper, Patterson uses aesthetics in the context of normative judgements about taste and 'aesthetic standards'. Aesthetics is here defined as a set of criteria and rules that determine artistic quality. This differs from the way in which it will be used in the later work of Brathwaite, Rohlehr, Walcott, Glissant, and Johnson. They all view aesthetics, I argue, as related to sensory perception in general, rather than as a feature of good or beautiful art. Furthermore, Patterson suggests that the West Indies requires the novelist to be 'a kind of sociologist': 'I think all art has to be didactic, and clearly so; I don't think we should conceal our intentions' (Walmsley, 1992, 53). These comments also understand aesthetics as predicated on normative judgement about what good art is and what one should ideally write about. Crucially, in a letter to Louis James in 1967, Brathwaite disagrees with Patterson's definition. As Walmsley writes: 'Brathwaite himself was sharply critical and disappointed with the content of Patterson's paper, finding "aesthetic" inadequately defined, and his point of view so negative that it was little to discuss' (Walmsley, 1992, 55). In the letter, Brathwaite doesn't explain why he finds this definition inadequate, but the dispute is likely due to their differing approaches to aesthetics. Where Patterson largely focuses on perceptions of quality and preferred writing styles, Brathwaite is less interested in quality or beauty, setting out instead to describe the various manifestations of literary forms, rhythms, and shapes in Caribbean writing.

The second public CAM meeting became an opportunity for other members to respond to Patterson's paper. In particular, Brathwaite outlined his 'own picture of a possible approach to the subject [of a West Indian aesthetic]' (Walmsley, 1992, 55). In this talk, Brathwaite suggests that there is a correspondence between Caribbean culture and jazz: 'that

distinctively jazz elements can be found in calypso and ska, in West Indian Poetry and the novel, and that these jazz elements constitute the direction of a West Indian aesthetic' (Walmsley, 1992, 57; Brathwaite, 1967–69, 336). Brathwaite's understanding of jazz as the main marker of a Caribbean aesthetic can be seen as somewhat normative if one interprets him as saying that jazz *should* be an ideal for Caribbean writers. However, his view of jazz can also be seen as descriptive, and the only unquestionably normative statement he makes is that he encourages the West Indian writers to 'improvise' (Walmsley, 1992, 56). As a normative ideal, improvisation can be seen as a radically open category that does not impose rules in the way that, for example Patterson had called for writing and art to be 'didactic'. Brathwaite therefore largely moves away from trying to find a suitable standard with which to judge the quality of Caribbean art, instead attempting to describe what he perceives to be some of the main characteristics of Caribbean writing. He thus shifts the focus from aesthetic quality to what he perceives to be *authentic* Caribbean strategies and approaches to writing.

1.2 LKJ, Brathwaite, and T.S. Eliot: The Voice in Nation Language Poetry

Brathwaite defines the representation of voices as the main characteristic of an authentic contemporary Caribbean aesthetic. Brathwaite enters into dialogue with the work of T.S. Eliot to argue that Caribbean poets should write poetry that represents their own genuine voice (Pollard, 2004; Hart, 2010).[41] According to Brathwaite, these voices should be rooted in their own experiences and national identities. Johnson, like Brathwaite, instigates a generational conversation with Eliot, but he does it from the perspective of dub culture and his experiences of living in Brixton. First, then, I explore how Johnson engages with T.S. Eliot indirectly via Brathwaite's emphasis on the importance of voice. Subsequently, I

[41] I mainly focus on Brathwaite's, and later Johnson's, dialogue with Eliot, but it is important to stress that other central Caribbean poets such as Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris have both critically engaged with Eliot's writing (Pollard, 2001, 2004; Bundy, 2005, 3).

examine how Johnson engages with Eliot directly by citing him as a source of inspiration for his own dub poetry.

The Anglo-American modernist poet and critic T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) is widely considered one of the major literary figures of the 20th-century (Moody, 1994). Of most importance here, however, is the fact that Eliot has an extensive Caribbean reception. In addition to being the progenitor of a more traditional field of 'Eliot studies', he also has a substantial position in the postcolonial literary world due to the impact of his poetry, and his poetic modernism generally, outside of European and western contexts (Wollaeger and Eatough, 2013; Kalliney, 2013; Mukherjee, 2013; Ramazani, 2014; 2006; Patke, 2013; Pollard, 2004; Hart, 2010). Brathwaite's writing is a good example of the ways in which Eliot's poetry has been appropriated by postcolonial and Caribbean writers. Yet, there is no denying that Brathwaite's interest in promoting Afro-Caribbean culture, and black consciousness more broadly, makes this a complicated and somewhat counter-intuitive coupling for those who are not fully immersed in this discourse.

In the poem 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet (1999), Johnson demonstrates that Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and T.S. Eliot belong to the elite of English language poetry with which he grew up. He writes that if he was a 'tap-natch' poet like Derek Walcott, Chris Okigbo, or T.S. Eliot, he would write a poem 'soh dyam deep/ dat it bittah-sweet' (Johnson, 2006, 94). Likewise, he writes that if he was a 'tap-natch' poet like Kamau Brathwaite, Martin Carter, Jayne Cortez, or Amiri Baraka, he would write a poem 'soh rude/ an rootsy/ an subversive' (Johnson, 2006, 95). Johnson's 'If I woz' implies that he does not consider himself a part of any of these two supposedly elite literary groups. Nonetheless, the groups together comprise what Johnson recognizes, for him, as a literary elite and 'imaginary canon' (McGill, 2003).

Johnson's dialogue with Brathwaite and Eliot is perhaps the clearest example of why his relationship with core discussions about aesthetics in the Caribbean canon, and indirectly the modernist canon, are crucial for a fuller understanding of his poetic contribution in an historical and theoretical context. While Brathwaite mainly struggled to create an appropriate response to the 'great' tradition of Europe from the perspective of the Caribbean 'little' tradition, for Johnson the Caribbean canon also has a 'great', or 'tap natch' status. From Johnson's standpoint – a young poet in the late 1970s – the Caribbean canon is an established tradition that fuels in him 'anxieties of influence' (Bloom, 1973).

As we will see, with reference to Brathwaite and Eliot, Johnson's poetry constantly moves between what Eliot describes as 'tradition' and 'the individual talent' (Eliot, 1975, 38). Brathwaite's temporal understanding of poetic space where the past and the present, the conventional and the innovative, are simultaneously at work, resonates with Eliot's. This becomes apparent when he accepts that Eliot can be seen as both traditional and Eurocentric on the one hand, and innovative and world-oriented on the other. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot describes his sense of history 'the timeless and the temporal together' (Eliot, 1975, 38). Brathwaite describes nation language as 'English in a new sense as I prefer to call it. English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but *language'* (Brathwaite, 1984, 5). Brathwaite and Johnson, like Eliot, believe that the past and the present are in dialogue, evidenced by Brathwaite's argument that sound poetry and dub can help us 'overstand how modern ancient is' (Brathwaite, 1984, 50). Even though there are some striking similarities, as in the example above, it is important to consider that Brathwaite performs a selective reading of Eliot's poetics, appropriating Eliot while bringing attention to the subversive difference between Eliot and the 'Caribbean Eliot'. Loyalty towards Eliot's intention was seen by Brathwaite as

less important than the ways in which Eliot's writing could be appropriated in productive ways in a specifically Caribbean context.

'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet' points to the fact that Eliot, due in great measure to Brathwaite's writing about nation language, became part of the Caribbean literary critical tradition with which Johnson would enter into dialogue as a thriving nation language poet.[42] The development of the term 'nation language' is crucial to understanding how Brathwaite, inspired by his reflections on Eliot, coined the term 'perceptual models'. As I've already argued, this concept is essential to our understanding of Johnson's continuation of a self-conscious engagement with oral expressions in his writing under the more general umbrella of the concept of a Caribbean aesthetic.

1.2.1 Brathwaite Appropriates Eliot: The Conversational Tone and the Poet's Place

Brathwaite's seminal book, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984), is the most influential critical text addressing the literary representation of Caribbean voices. It is therefore not surprising that his ideas would appeal to Johnson who writes in a phonetic rendition of Jamaican speech patterns. According to Laurence Breiner in *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry,* there is one fundamental and overarching question that dominates any poem with a speaking Caribbean subject: 'What language do West Indians speak, and how do we get it on paper?' (Breiner, 1998, 164).[43] Brathwaite defines the engagement with the accurate and authentic representation of voices as the main characteristic of contemporary Caribbean poetry. He stresses, however, that the problem of studying nation language poetry is that there are few resources to refer to: 'I cannot really refer you to Authorities because there aren't any. One of our urgent tasks now is to try to create our own Authorities' (Brathwaite, 1984, 14). A great deal has happened in the

[42] For more about the postcolonial canonization and rewriting of T.S. Eliot, and other western writers, see Ankhi Mukherjee's *What is a Classic?* (Mukherjee, 2013).
[43] *History of the Voice* was originally a lecture presented at Harvard in 1979.

field of Caribbean literary criticism since Brathwaite made this appeal in 1979, but he is still, as this chapter suggests, the most definitive authority on nation language poetry today.

Demonstrating Brathwaite's interest in oral poetry and voice, *History of the Voice* is dedicated to Michael Smith, a Jamaican dub poet celebrated for his unique voice and performance, who was stoned to death in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1983. He is also one of the poets whom Linton Kwesi Johnson most admires, labelling Smith 'the people's poet' in the article 'Remembering Michael Smith: Mikey, Dub and I' (Johnson, 2007, 152). The high modernist T.S. Eliot, to whom Brathwaite and Johnson both respect greatly, is more unexpectedly included on this list of admired poets. Brathwaite acknowledges the influence Eliot and modernism has had on Caribbean poets, particularly the emphasis on vernacular form and what Brathwaite calls its 'conversational tone'. According to Brathwaite, exposure to Eliot was the main reason that Caribbean mainstream poets turned from Standard English to nation language: 'What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot' (Brathwaite, 1992; Brathwaite, 1984, 30).

History of the Voice is a landmark text in Caribbean literary criticism partly because it traces a direct lineage from modernist poetry to nation language poetry in the Caribbean. The phrase nation language describes the many national versions of the English language, and reminds us of its diversity. Jamaican creole (known locally as Patois) is one example of nation language; Trinidadian creole is another. Brathwaite writes that the Jamaican poet, educator, and folklorist Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) was for a long time one of the few poets writing nation language. This was also the reason why the literary establishment in Jamaica for many years ignored or overlooked her. In *The Hybrid Muse (2001)*, Jahan Ramazani considers Bennett as a 'master ironist', arguing that her recognition beyond the Caribbean has been long overdue (Ramazani, 2001, 106). When Brathwaite wrote *History of the Voice*, the

mainstream Anglophone Caribbean poets had begun to draw on the form 'signalled by Miss Lou' and had started writing in nation language. Brathwaite stresses that Dante Alighieri was the predecessor of this development, when he argued in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1304) at the beginning of the 14th -century for the recognition of his own Tuscan vernacular to replace Latin (Brathwaite, 1984, 14). It was, however, hearing Eliot's recorded voice on the radio that became the breakthrough for many Caribbean poets.

One cannot underestimate the importance of radio technology in creating a space of contact between authors in the Caribbean and authors situated in the imperial centre. During the Second World War, the BBC set up the overseas service *Calling the West Indies* to give Caribbean servicemen based in Britain a chance to maintain contact with friends and relatives at home (Griffith, 2003, 196–198; Newton, 2008, Breiner, 2003). The journalist and poet Una Marson conceived the programme in 1943, and it then evolved into the hugely influential programme *Caribbean Voices*. The programme was modelled on George Orwell's poetry magazine *Voice*, which was recorded in London and transmitted to an Indian audience in 1942. It was not unusual for Marson to read poetry over the airways, alongside Eliot and other notable figures (Kalliney, 2013, 3; Low, 2002).

Brathwaite recalls listening to recordings of Eliot reading 'The Waste Land', 'Preludes', 'Four Quartets', and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.[44] Around the same time, Brathwaite was listening to Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Kenny Clarke, and he detected a similar kind of 'jazz' in Eliot's voice and rhythm (Brathwaite, 1984, 31). Brathwaite does not give any specific examples of the perceived jazz of Eliot's voice, but he discusses Eliot's deadpan delivery and the 'riddims of St. Louis' in his voice (Brathwaite, 1984, 31).[45] Listening to recordings of Eliot's readings, we can identify what Brathwaite

[44] Regrettably, Brathwaite does not specifiy exactly which recordings he heard.
[45] The fact that Brathwaite actually spells rhythm 'riddim', exemplifies that he interprets Eliot from the perspective of a specifically Anglo-Caribbean discourse on music. 'Riddim' carries with it connotations to the Jamaican recording industry.

describes, as I will now demonstrate. When Eliot reads 'The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock', he almost sings rather than reads the following lines: 'That is not what I meant at all./ That is not it, at all.' (Eliot, 1969, 16). In so doing, he brings our attention to the *musicality* of his poetry.[46] The lines might look random and indistinctive in print, but when we hear Eliot reading them, they come across as constituting a 'micro tune' within the poem. The dramatic effect of altering voices, and the ways in which the different languages and voices create different rhythmic structures in the poem, becomes especially evident when he reads them out loud. In many ways, the different voices and rhythms that Eliot uses help to represent the West as a composite place and concept. If we see the melodies as structures, the West is not represented as one unified structure but as a complex network of different fragments that, like melodies, can function in both harmony and disharmony. This points to the fact that Eliot's work is filled with political and social implications, even though his poetry often has a formalist and aesthetic focus, and this appeales to writers like Brathwaite and Johnson who are interested in exploring the political dimension of poetic form.

Eliot's 'Unreal City' in 'The Waste Land' describes a moment in history tainted by a feeling of disillusionment and loss after the First World War. Eliot may have been interested in the 'mind of Europe' and its regional history, but poems like 'The Waste Land' suggest that he saw this 'mind' as made up of many different rhythms and voices from both past and present, near and far. Charles Pollard argues in *New World Modernism: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite* that Brathwaite's postcolonialism and Eliot's modernism share a preoccupation with cultural fragmentation, before aspiring to create a new unity out of this fragmentation (Pollard, 2004, 15–40). Brathwaite's determination to define a new Caribbean poetics borrows in a number of ways modernism's constructive strategies, as expressed in Ezra Pound's much quoted slogan 'Make it new' (Pound, 1934) [1917]. Yet,

[46] Eliot reading 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', online source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAO3QTU4PzY (03.05, 18.05). Ufortunately, I have not been able to date the recording.

there is an acknowledgement that constructive strategies are often enhanced by first conceding the fragmented nature of both Caribbean history and styles.

Brathwaite's interest in Eliot raises questions about why modernist poetry could adapt so easily to an anti-colonial moment in Caribbean criticism. Would that be the case if there were not an anti-colonial undercurrent latent in modernism? An anti-colonial undercurrent can be present alongside colonial overtones. In *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial,* Elleke Boehmer argues that there have been numerous instances of politically and culturally constructive interactions between literary modernism and its anti-imperial contexts (Boehmer, 2002, 1–43). The ideas of making new and interrogating authority through experimentation with form are some of the anti-colonial potentials in modernism that may have appealed to Brathwaite. Eliot's use of a variety of voices and shifts in rhythm and pace challenge the idea of an 'authoritarian' one-way stream of communication transmitted from narrator to reader. Altering between voices strengthens the idea of literature as a potentially democratic space that allows a diversity of perspectives and experiences to coexist.

This difference between reading and listening illuminates why hearing Eliot's voice on the radio, rather than simply reading the poems on the page, posed a different set of questions for Brathwaite. The play between deadpan speech and jazz groove identified by Brathwaite becomes clearer when we listen to Eliot read. Eliot's spoken jazz elements have a strong effect on the listener exactly because they contrast with the deadpan delivery that often surrounds them. What emerges is reminiscent of the ways in which jazz vocals and jazz instruments alter between different modes, using improvisation, and employing call and response techniques. One piece of jazz music can contain a constant shift between talking, singing, scatting, and 'breaks'. When Eliot reads 'The Waste Land', his voice seems to possess a scatting or rapping quality when he utters: 'Yes, bad. Stay with me/ Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak/ What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?/ I never

know what you are thinking. Think' (Eliot, 1969, 65). The lines incorporate the sometimes halting, confused, stuttering, and disordered flow of conversation. This effect brings attention to modernist poetry's embrace of the ordinary and use of stream of consciousness. Interruptions and stuttering come to signify the natural spontaneity of colloquial speech acts, resonating with what Brathwaite describes as the conversational tone and the speaking voice. The faults and mistakes generate a kind of reality effect, and enhance the impression of the voice being 'living' rather than artificial or stylised.

The importance of Eliot's interest in poets reading from their work is foregrounded when Brathwaite quotes his sleeve note to 'Four Quartets': 'The chief value of the author's record…is a guide to the *rhythms* [Brathwaite's italics]' (Brathwaite, 1984, 31). Eliot's emphasis on the rhythmic qualities of poetry resonates with the interest in 'riddim' in the scholarship on jazz, reggae and calypso in the Caribbean. By calling it 'a guide to the *rhythms*', Eliot indirectly acknowledges the contextual and organic variables that shape the writing and reading of poetry. Eliot recalls a moment quite similar to Brathwaite's first encounter with Eliot's voice: 'I shall always remember the impression of W.B. Yeats reading poetry aloud. To hear him read his own works was to be made to recognize how much the Irish way of speech is needed to bring out the beauties of Irish poetry' (Eliot, 1975, 112). As for Brathwaite, Eliot was fascinated and inspired by the speaking voice of other poets, and this became an inspiration for Brathwaite because his poetry and criticism formed a direct link between voice and regional identity: 'The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place'* (Eliot, 1975, 112). Eliot's connection between music, common speech, and place appealed to Caribbean poets who experimented with 'riddim', voice, and nation language. More generally, Eliot's writing appealed to the sentiment of wanting to create poetry rooted in one's 'own sense a time', as Johnson calls it.

It is important to note that Caribbean poets often perform a selective reading of Eliot's work, which demonstrates that it is appropriation and not just a form of inspiration. In 'The Music of Poetry', Eliot writes that the poet should not lose contact with the 'changing language of common intercourse' (Eliot, 1975, 110). However, Eliot also expresses views of language that are more ambivalent towards common speech: 'Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us/ To purify the dialect of the tribe' (Eliot, 1969, 194). Brathwaite departs from the more pessimistic views of common language and culture found in some parts of Eliot's late poetry. For Brathwaite, the use of colloquial speech is seen as a purely constructive and positive activity, as well as the main tool for reconstructing the submerged African presence in the Caribbean, as we will see in this chapter's later discussion of Brathwaite's notion of 'the tyranny of the pentameter'.

Further demonstrating Brathwaite's selective reading, Pollard argues that Brathwaite generally appropriates the young 'radical' Eliot rather than Eliot's older, revised poetics which emphasise that the poet should purify and refine common speech to an ideal and stylised form (Pollard, 2004, 80–109). Brathwaite looks to the Eliot that used Cockney, as he portrayed the working class in the pub scene of 'A Game of Chess' in 'The Waste Land':

> When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said-/ I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,/ HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME/ Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart./ He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you' (Eliot, 1969, 65).

The bartender interrupts a conversation between two women in a pub to let everyone know that the pub is closing. Eliot radically takes on the language of a lower class and mimics their voices, speaking them in a colloquial working-class cockney accent. This is imitated by Brathwaite in the poem 'Tizzic': 'An'then there was Tizzic. He prefer the booze an'women/ it shame much heart to think/ how many t'ings he had wid chile: Shirley, Boths, Phosphorine' (Brathwaite, 1969, 103). Here, Brathwaite depicts a descendant of slaves who lives a tough life occupied with drinking and womanising. He uses nation language and mimics the

language of the Caribbean 'folk' and lower classes. The use of nation language is therefore based on the same artistic principle that Eliot employs in his most radical work; that is, to mimic the speaking voice of common people. According to Pollard, Brathwaite also looks to the Eliot that uses racial ventriloquism, American slang, and popular cultures like jazz, music hall, and minstrel in 'Sweeney Agonistes' (Pollard, 2004, 94). [47]

Brathwaite shows that one does not have to accept Eliot's ideological and poetic system in its entirety. One can borrow the aspects that are useful and disregard those that are not. This is why 'appropriation' is the right term to describe Brathwaite's treatment of Eliot. Brathwaite appropriates Eliot as a subversive figure, instrumentalising him to his own agenda. In *The Empire Writes Back,* strategies of appropriation are defined as one of the central characteristics of postcolonial writing. Therefore, postcolonial writers are frequently understood as interpreters who adduce a *reading*, rather than a writing (Ashcroft et al., 2002, 58–60). They often reinterpret or re-read canonical texts in order to recontextualise them for their own purposes.

If we consider that radio technology played a significant role in presenting Eliot to the Caribbean, the notion of appropriation is especially useful for understanding how a 'Caribbean Eliot' is constructed, and why this Eliot differs from the Eliot considered as the ambassador of Eurocentric modernism. Brathwaite appropriated Eliot's voice as it emerged from a radio in the Caribbean. This voice was treated almost as a material, malleable and largely freed from Eliot's body, time, and place, that could be used independently of Eliot's specific geographical and historical origins. Brathwaite's appropriation of modernism in relation to the development of nation language in the Caribbean echoes what Eliot writes about the readjustment of the relations that compose tradition: 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (Eliot, 1975, 39). The dialogue

[47] For a broader analysis of Eliot's use of popular culture and combination of 'high culture' and 'low culture', see David E. Chinitz *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chinitz, 2003).

between Caribbean nation language poetry and modernist poetry therefore demand a reevaluation of how we understand both terms. Rather than being antagonistic to one another, Caribbean poets and the poets in the English canon share an interest in expressing their own perceptual models. Brathwaite does not attack the chosen focus of the poets in the English canon; rather, he attacks how the perceptual models in the English canon impose themselves hegemonically in the Caribbean, and turns Eliot into an interesting subversive anti-establishment figure in order to do so. Eliot's influence, via Johnson's reading of Brathwaite, serves as a catalyst for his interest in incorporating Caribbean contexts and voices into his writing.

1.2.2 Caribbean Perceptual Models: An Approach to Writing Authentically

So far I have explored some of the ways in which T.S. Eliot has influenced Brathwaite's work. Yet, before looking at some of the concrete ways Johnson responds to Eliot, it is important to focus on Brathwaite's emphasis on authenticity and truthfulness. Brathwaite makes it clear that Caribbean poets took these modernist influences and incorporated them into to their own Caribbean models: 'they eventually went on to become part of their own environmental expression' (Brathwaite, 1984, 31). Caribbean poets appropriate Eliot into their own arguments and agendas. In this way, their engagement with European authors is not aimed at creating derivative expressions; it is a strategy intended to create *authentically* Caribbean forms of writing. The concept of Caribbean perceptual models is significant to the poetry of Brathwaite and Johnson, because it proposes that the principle of cultural authenticity is a complex poetic and formal construction that includes both borrowed and innovative elements.

As this thesis is concerned to foreground throughout, Johnson's Caribbean aesthetic is therefore not only a result of how he conforms to standards of oral poetry, but also how he

incorporates new elements such as punk into these forms. A true Caribbean aesthetic can, as several critics have argued (Walcott, 1998; Glissant, 1997; Brathwaite, 1984), paradoxically incorporate 'un-Caribbean' elements if doing so is the most honest reflection of the Caribbean poet's experiences and environment. Having heard Eliot on the radio in the Caribbean, Brathwaite would not be faithful to his own Caribbean experiences if he erased these 'un-Caribbean' elements of his environment. Similarly, Johnson would not be accommodating his experiences as Black British if he refused to engage with his punk reception.

Brathwaite argues, however, that even though poets should embrace the creolized nature of multicultural societies, they have to acknowledge the imbalance of power between African and European influences. In *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770–1820 (1971)*, originally his doctoral thesis accepted by the University of Sussex in 1968, Brathwaite examines Jamaica as a plural creole society. His critical ambition is to create a new set of tools to understand the postcolonial identity of the New World heritage (Pollard, 2004). In his view, however, this new Caribbean 'parochial wholeness' cannot be fulfilled before all the submerged fragments, what he calls the 'little tradition of the ex-slave', have achieved the same prestige and influence as the 'great tradition' of Europe (Brathwaite, 1971, 311). Because of the strong emphasis on English culture in the curriculum, Brathwaite explains, children would write essays describing snow falling on the cane fields (Brathwaite, 1984, 9). Brathwaite's criticism of this tendency is closely related to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as the process of decolonizing the mind; both are concerned to show how imperialism manifests in culture, and literary language and style more specifically (Wa Thiong'o, 1994; Said 1993). He describes a situation where Caribbean children have to adopt alien perceptual models: languages, cultures, and sensibilities that are alien to what they actually see and experience for themselves. Fighting against the inferior status of nation

language became the most important step towards finding more relevant perceptual models for writers and readers in the Caribbean. Brathwaite calls this process the *alter/native* (Brathwaite, 1992, 4). Caribbean poets create an aesthetic 'alternative' to the western canon that is also 'native'. In addition, the poets also 'alter', in the meanings of changing and shifting, some already pre-given conditions: 'We have to alter the nature of this plantation (Brathwaite, 1992, 4). Johnson's work is clearly embedded in this idea of creative and aesthetic resistance, although from a Black British perspective.[48]

Despite Brathwaite's interest in Eliot, 'The Waste Land' of course immediately situates the poem within the English perceptual model Brathwaite deems alien to the Caribbean experience: 'April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain./ Winter kept us warm, covering/ Earth in forgetful snow' (1969, 61). These famous lines contain both snow and lilacs, two nouns that largely remove the poem from a non-European environment. This is of course an essentialist simplification of the poem's thematic and cultural complexity, but snow is precisely the example Brathwaite uses when he writes about Caribbean schoolchildren exposed only to an English sensibility. Moreover, the description of the four seasons follows the typical pattern of a northern European climate. The poem also introduces the reader to the 'Unreal City': 'The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf/ Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind/ Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed./ Sweet Thames, run softly, until I end my song' (Eliot, 1969, 67). In 'The Waste Land', these European perceptual models are implicit through the emphasis on the four seasons, climate and metropolitan landscape, but it is also made explicit by the specific geographical references such as London Bridge and the River Thames. The emphasis on a specific environment,

[48] The importance of creating models for writing and reading that serve as an alternative to colonially imposed English models is a reocurring and central topic in postcolonial literature and theory. See for exampleV.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961)*,* Derek Walcott 's *What the Twilight Says* (1998), and *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, ch. 4 (Boehmer, 2005, 132–171).

region, and climate might, however, be more immediate to Brathwaite's *oeuvre* than to Eliot's.[49] 'Little Gidding' in 'Four Quartets' is an example of how Eliot's poetry can be abstract in a manner that makes it difficult to speak of a plot evolving in a specific time or place: 'Suspended in time, between pole and tropic' (Eliot, 1969, 191). This language is far from indicative of a kind of landscape realism, and it is less accurate to equate it with a location in the real world than to see it as a linguistically constructed notion of space that only exists in that specific sentence. However, when we read Eliot's 'The Waste Land' alongside Brathwaite's criticism, what may initially have come across as a neutral or universal setting for poetry is revealed as a regional and environmentally specific. Brathwaite's Caribbean *and* modernism-inspired poetry brings attention to the regional, European, and perhaps exclusionary dimensions of modernist poetry, which continue to persist alongside its abstraction and emphasis on cultural fragmentation (Douglass, 2011; Ricks, 1988).

For Brathwaite, the Caribbean environment becomes a way of creating alternative perceptual models to those of European poetry, even as he continues to acknowledge the influence European writing has had in the Caribbean. In the poem 'Coral', collected in *Islands,* Brathwaite clearly takes inspiration from Eliot's modernist poetry, but he takes pains to situate his own poems in the climate and environment of the Caribbean: 'The Coral killers crust my wall of bone/ make feet for footprints on this first beach;/ cold sea of sound splinters the fishes' dawn;/ it rings bells in the shingle/ it curls messages into the shell' (Brathwaite, 1969, 75). Eliot and Brathwaite both focus on shores, but where Eliot depicts the Thames, Brathwaite depicts the beach. Their diction and symbols also share some similarities: Crust/broken, clutch/curl, sink into the wet bank/footprints on this first beach, song/sound. Brathwaite, much like Eliot, portrays a site of what he describes as 'bottomless gloom'

[49] In the 'The Dry Salvages' in 'Four Quartets', nevertheless, Eliot describes 'dead negroes' floating on the river. This shows that the settings of his poetry were not completely removed from the environment and geography of his native St. Louis (Eliot, 1969, 184).

(Brathwaite, 1969, 76). Yet, they portray different environments and perceptual models ‘natural’ to their respective regions. They also both choose sites that have a powerful symbolic resonance within their culture: the city and the beach are recurring sites in the literary traditions with which each is commonly associated. The city notably plays a crucial role in modernist poetry (Whithworth, 2007; Crawford, 1987; Spears, 1970), while the beach and sea have been a much studied topic in Caribbean literature and criticism (Georges, 2017; Bonnet and Schon, 2002; Deloughrey, 2007).

Derek Walcott’s poem ‘The Castaway’ depicts a man who appears to have been washed up on a beach and who ‘devours the seascape for the morsel/ Of a sail’ (Walcott, 2007, 21). I discuss Walcott’s poetry in more detail below, but here he provides an example of how beach, sea, and ocean iconography are a part of the central tropical tropes that often appear in Caribbean poetry. Brathwaite even introduces the epistemological concept of ‘tidalectics’, envisioned as an alternative to Hegelian dialectics. It evokes the cyclical and dynamic continual movement of the ebb and flow of the ocean, as an alternative to synthesising and linear understandings of history (DeLoughrey, 2007, 2; Shell, 2014). Eliot describes a place ‘Under the brown fog of a winter noon’ (Eliot, 1969, 68); Brathwaite a place ‘fed by the ringed sun and the distant Amazon’ (Brathwaite, 1969, 75). The existential drama is depicted through metaphors where the environment, climate, and geography convey a sense of history. For Brathwaite, the beach and sea are places where the Caribbean present meets its traumatic past. They signify the passage and arrival of slaves from Africa, but also their encounter with the shores of the New World. Brathwaite’s beach and Eliot’s city are places that symbolise the possibilities of modernity, while they are also traumatic sites marked by history, its causalities, and its debris. Brathwaite and Eliot clearly aspire to different culturally specific outcomes. But their expression of existential ideas through perceptual models specific to an environment share a similar interest in creating poetic voices

that reflect the experience of a particular civilisation and cultural heritage, while simultaneously acknowledging their fragmented and hybrid formation.

Though *History of the Voice* touches on many topics, it is in the end a work of literary criticism that conceptualises some concrete textual characteristics of Caribbean poetry. The most tangible and technical argument is that Caribbean nation language poetry challenges the hegemony of the iambic pentameter. Brathwaite writes that in order to break down the pentameter, Caribbean poets discover 'an ancient form', the calypso, that employs dactyls (Brathwaite, 1984, 17), and argues that nation language introduces alternative speech rhythms that are an equally valuable poetic resource. The act of rejecting pentameter is something Brathwaite has in common with other poets that have tried to write English language poetry in oppositional ways: Pound's recognition, 'To break the pentameter, that was the first heave' (Canto LXXX1, 1.54), spoke to the project of postcolonial poetry, including its Caribbean formations. Though stanzaic and metred verse is written in all the former colonies, postcolonial poets also show a marked preference for free verse (Patke, 2006, 6–79). Pentameter is the model for poetry that Brathwaite most strongly associates with Anglophone poetry, and he argues that the model has gained a dominant position internationally:

> By the time we reach Chaucer (1345–1400) the pentameter prevails. Over in the New World, the Americans – Walt Whitman – tried to bridge or to break the pentameter through a cosmic movement, a large movement of sound. cummings tried to fragment it. And Marianne Moore attacked it with syllabics. But basically the pentameter remained (Brathwaite, 1984, 10).

Despite many attempts to break away from it, the pentameter remains, according to Brathwaite, the dominant poetic form. In addition, it carries with it an experience 'which is not the experience of a hurricane' (Brathwaite, 1984, 10. Brathwaite describes nation language poetry as a howl, a shout, a machine gun, the wind, or the wave. It is based on an oral tradition: 'The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word' (Brathwaite, 1984, 17).

Brathwaite's criticism of the hegemony of the English canon in the Caribbean school system and the Caribbean 'rewriting' of modernist paradigms function as an extension of the post-independence project of liberating Caribbean culture from colonial influence (Rosenberg, 2007). Undeniably, then, it also has a strong nationalist dimension. Brathwaite's nationalism is therefore relevant to understanding Johnson's interest in his Caribbean heritage. Yet, Johnson's approach to Jamaican nationalism is complicated by his biography and location: 'we are here to stay/ inna Inglan' (Johnson, 2006, 25). Johnson came to England in 1962, the year of Jamaican independence. Although Johnson has an interest in Jamaican politics, he is personally invested in, and has more at stake when talking about, the future of the UK. The UK is his current home, after all, and he has consistently emphasised that it will continue to be so. As the British Black Power movement made clear, inspired by campaigns by South Asians in the East End, 'come what may we are here to stay' (Bunce and Field, 2014, 153).

Johnson would engage with Caribbean identity and language, but not within the confines of the new Jamaican nation. Rather, he would explore what it meant to be black and British, Jamaican and English. Brathwaite's criticism was, however, still relevant to Johnson's experiences in Britain. Johnson was surprised when he first discovered through the Black Panther's library that there was such a thing as black literature: 'I thought books were only written by Europeans' (Morris, 1989, 251). The English school system did not introduce him to black or non-European authors. Johnson's alienating encounter with literature in the English school system in the 1960s is similar to Brathwaite's description of children's encounters with literature in the Caribbean, and points to the continuity between the two experiences. When Johnson first started to experiment with poetry, he used the traditional formal English second person 'thou' and 'thy' because this was the only poetic model that they had encountered (Morris, 1989, 253). Johnson eventually rejected the idea that poetry

had to follow these traditional English models, and became interested in finding ways of writing that could better express his own experience in London: 'den all a wi jus fahwod/ up to Not'n'Hill Gate (Johnson, 2006, 37).

Through his use of phonetic spelling, which evokes Jamaican casual speech, Johnson represents his own experiences and cultural location. But he also does this by portraying everyday life in Brixton where he grew up: 'last satdey/ I nevah deh pan no faam,/ so I decide fi tek a walk/ doun a Brixton/ an see wha gwaan' (Johnson, 2006, 3). His radical linguistic and thematic choices anchored in his local community accords with other postcolonial critiques of colonial mechanisms, an example of 'writing back' of which Brathwaite was a case in point (Ashcroft et al., 2002). But it can also be viewed as a very common contemporary understanding of art in general: that art should display different perspectives and that art should not be governed by consensus.[50] Postcolonial criticism and art criticism more generally are fascinatingly intertwined in Brathwaite's and Johnson's writing. 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet' is in many ways a meta-commentary on the diverse criteria poetry needs to satisfy to be considered 'tap-natch'. Some poets such as Eliot and Walcott are so 'dyam deep/ dat it bittah-sweet'. Poets like Kamau Brahtwaite and Amiri Baraka are 'soh rude/ an rootsy/ an subversive (Johnson, 2006, 95). He actively and self-concsiously thinks through the different aims and achievements that poetry by black writers – and T.S. Eliot, who is given an exceptional status – can have in different political and cultural contexts. His promotion of these mostly black and postcolonial poets is combined with an acknowledgment of the different stylistic strategies that exist among them. Consequently, Johnson's postcolonial literary criticism, emphasising the achievements of black and minority writers, and general art criticism, advocating plurality, pragmatism, and stylistic individuality, go hand in hand.

[50] Jacques Rancière's concept of *dissensus* is an example of how contemporary art and aesthetic theory challenge notions of consensus (Rancière, 2010).

Though not considering himself a 'tap-natch poet', Johnson has become one of the authorities on the kinds of nation language poetry for which Brathwaite called. Nevertheless, he also brings something new to the discussion: 'Still/ inna di meantime/ wid mi riddim/ wid mi rime/ wid mi ruff base line/ wid mi own sense a time' (Johnson, 2006, 95). Brathwaite's writing about national language and alternative Caribbean perceptual models, and response to Eliot, certainly influence Johnson, but he introduces two new elements to this discussion: the young Black British experience, through the depiction of Brixton, and, as we will see, the importance of dub music for the creation and development of diasporic Caribbean identities.

1.2.3 LKJ's Response to Eliot: Voices of the Living and the Dead

In this section, I examine some of the key features of Johnson's first collection of poetry *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, including his imagery of fire and of echo, to show how Johnson responds to T.S. Eliot's poetry more individually and directly, rather than indirectly via Brathwaite and the Caribbean canon. Eliot remains one of the poets Johnson lists as a leading inspiration even today. At an English PEN event in 2014, Johnson was asked to choose a selection of work from poets that had inspired him and he included T.S. Eliot along with a list of other mainly black poets.[51] I also discuss how Brathwaite's argument that the conversational tone is a core characteristic of a Caribbean aesthetic is reflected in Johnson's early work. Finally, I demonstrate how this collection raises interesting questions about the relevance of Eliot and modernist poetry to Johnson's poetry, exploring some of the possibilities and limitations of a modernist contextualisation of Johnson.

Making a comparison between the two appropriations of Eliot highlights that Johnson is a more multifaceted figure than the critical reception of him has so far suggested. Johnson is well-known for his militant political message against racism in Britain, but it is less widely

[51] The English PEN Inspirations event was held at the Tricycle Theater in London on the 2th February 2014.

acknowledged that he is a part of a Caribbean, and perhaps also modernist, critical tradition where reflections on the political underpinnings of aesthetic choices have played a central role. Like Brathwaite, Johnson asks complex questions about how we define the difference between high and low poetry, and he challenges this distinction by appropriating Eliot. By doing this, Johnson challenges whom we define as 'tap-natch', and whom we exclude from this category. Influenced by Brathwaite, he objects to the way in which the perceptual models represented in the English canon have marginalised other voices. Yet, crucially, he resists the urge to reject white canonical writers completely.

Brathwaite stresses that the conversational mode can also challenge the tyranny of the pentameter when nation language is *not* used (Brathwaite, 1984, 32). The complex point that Brathwaite advances about the various forms resistance can take is of major importance to our understanding of Johnson's poetry, especially his early work. Johnson's first volume of poetry, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, was published by *Race Today* Publications in 1974. It consists of one play, 'Voices of the Living and the Dead', and two poems, 'Youths of Hope' and 'Five Nights of Bleeding'. 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' was staged in 1973 and was produced by the Jamaican novelist Lindsay Barrett. Rasta Love, a group of musicians Johnson met through the Black Panthers, accompanied the play. 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' contrasts with Johnson's trademark style associated with poems like 'Inglan is a Bitch'. It includes motifs characteristic of his later poems, but it is not written in a recognisably Jamaican patois: 'Words of warmth make my head mad/ with voice and voices echoing/ making a ring of truth around the sound' (Johnson, 1988, 23). Indeed, the language appears much closer to Standard English. For the first readers in 1974, Johnson would not initially have been received as what Brathwaite defines as a nation language poet. In comparison, in 'Inglan is a Bitch' (1980) the word 'make' is spelled 'mek', 'the' is spelled 'di', 'of' is spelled 'awf', and 'with' is spelled 'wid'. 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' is

different from Johnson's later poetry because its Caribbeanness is less obvious (Johnson, 2006, 39–41).[52]

Nation language plays a significant role in Brathwaite's Caribbean aesthetics, but it is *not* synonymous with that aesthetic. This is a complexity that surfaces in some of Johnson's earliest poetry written in Standard English. As I have shown in previous sections, Brathwaite argues that the conversational tone, which he also recognises in Eliot, is a crucial component of a Caribbean aesthetic. One of the most important characteristics of Caribbean poetry, according to Brathwaite, is therefore not nation language per se, but rather that it challenges alien and forced ways of seeing and framing the world. In this sense, Brathwaite's idea of a Caribbean poetics can be linked to an idealisation of avant-gardism.[53] Again it is worth reiterating that for Brathwaite Caribbean aesthetics produces writing that resists forced frameworks of seeing. He does not primarily align Caribbean aesthetics with a particular kind of *content* – not even nation language.

Brathwaite's argument that the resistant dimensions of an alternative Caribbean literary form is not only defined by the use of nation language, but also by rhythm, environment, and conversational mode, has implications for Johnson's writing: 'SCAR. WOUND. FIRE. DEATH./ WOUND. FIRE. DEATH. SCAR./ FIRE. DEATH. SCAR.WOUND./ DEATH. SCAR. WOUND. FIRE' (Johnson, 1988, 15). This is one example from the play of how the symbolism can be rooted in a Caribbean aesthetic, even though it does not deploy nation language. The use of typography and repetition of short and violent words enhances their hard-hitting impression, which are capitalized and therefore

[52] These are the spellings in the Penguin *Selected Poems* edition from 2006.
[53] Here referring in general to art that is experimental, innovative, and ahead of its time, rather than to Peter Bürger's defintion of the historical avant-garde in *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Bürger, 1984). For an extended discussion about The Caribbean Artist Movement's avant-gardism see Stephen Voyce's *Poetic Community: Avant-garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (Voyce, 2013, 102–161). See also Aubrey William's 'The Artist in the Caribbean' in *Savacou* no. 2, where he wrtites: 'It always seems in the history of man that the arts give direction for the technology, the philosophy, the politics, and the very life of the people. Art is always in the foreground; it is the true *avant garde'* (Williams, 1970).

louder than the rest of the poem. The word ‘fire’ also figures in an extremely long list of reggae song titles. For example: Niney and the Observer’s ‘Blood and Fire’, The Viceroys’ ‘Jump ın a Fire’, Lloyd and Devon’s ‘Out of the Fire‘, Freddie McKay’s ‘Fire is Burning’, Freddie Mclean’s ‘Too Much Fire’, Laurel Aitken’s ‘Says Fire’, Wayne Wayde’s ‘Fire Fire’, Truth, Fact & Correct’s ‘Babylon Deh Pon Fire’, Keith Hudson’s ‘Smoke Without Fire’, The Ethiopians’ ‘What a Fire’, and Hugh Mundell’s ‘Jah Fire’. Bob Marley and The Wailers’ classic LP ‘Catch a Fire’ also resonates powerfully in this context, and one of the most influential British record labels currently reissuing dub and roots reggae in the UK is called ‘Blood and Fire’.

Repeated emphasis on the word ‘fire’ in Johnson’s poetry – he writes of ‘beating out a rhythm with a fire’ in ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ (Johnson, 2006, 6) – roots his symbolism in reggae’s lyrical tradition, and therefore Caribbean perceptual models, even though nation language is not used. This use of reggae symbolism shows that nation language is just one aspect of Johnson’s complex engagement with a Caribbean aesthetic. An understanding of reggae subcultures is necessary to decode tropes and figures in Johnson’s Caribbean aesthetic which cannot be fully understood in terms of nation language, or nationalist and race-based concepts. The ‘Caribbean’ and ‘nation’ in Johnson’s ‘Caribbean aesthetic’ is made increasingly complex by the fact that reggae is a Jamaican phenomenon that has evolved into a global popular culture – a theme I return to in the third chapter when I discuss the concept of bass culture.

The play ‘Voices of the Living and the Dead’ may give us a more solid understanding of how T.S. Eliot has been appropriated by Caribbean poets including Johnson, and of some of the problems of tracing and locating this kind of influence. Johnson’s use of verse on stage resonates with Eliot’s defence of the poetic drama (Eliot, 1975, 132–147). ‘Voices of the Living and the Dead’ is a verse drama that confuses critical understandings of the difference

between the formal characteristics of modernist poetry and those of dub. Johnson was influenced by dub, but also by modernism via Brathwaite and the Caribbean canon.[54] The title of the play recalls Brathwaite's presentation of the importance of 'voice' in Anglo-Caribbean poetry. In the play, the 'Living', the 'Dead' and the 'Echo' are the main characters. The Echo repeats fragments of the Living's and Dead's voices and distorts them into new and strange forms: 'DEAD: There is a scar…/ECHO: A scar… a scar…a scar…a scar/ DEAD: On the finest flower of history's/ spring-time garden./ There is a wound/ ECHO: A wound…a wound…a wound…a wound' (Johnson, 1988, 9). The echo effect is one of the key characteristics of dub music. However, repetition or 'echoing' is also a common device in modernist poetry. Consider Eliot's 'Burning burning burning burning/O Lord Thou pluckest me out/ O Lord Thou pluckest/ burning' (Eliot, 1969, 70) in 'The Waste Land', or '*This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the words ends*'in 'The Hollow Men' (Eliot, 1969, 86). Johnson's use of repetition can be perceived as a device he takes from modernist poetry and dub. However, this two-fold possibility makes it difficult to say for certain how much someone like Eliot has influenced Johnson's poetry, directly or indirectly. Some modernist traits may in fact be taken from dub, and vice versa.[55]

One of the poems that Johnson chose when citing his influences at the English PEN event in 2014 was 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', claiming that it should be called 'The Blues of J. Alfred Prufrock'. This is a pertinent example of how Johnson, like Brathwaite before him, appropriates Eliot. Johnson embraces Eliot because he perceives Eliot from a blues/jazz/reggae/perspective. This demands that we revisit Brathwaite's statement quoted earlier about how Caribbean poets integrated modernism into their own traditions:

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[54] Johnson has also stated that he is influenced by the Harlem Renaissance (DiNovella, 2007, Caesar, 1996). This might have been another source of modernist influence.

[55] For further comparisons between modernist strategies and/or vernacular modernism and dub with regards to its use of tecnnology to create echo, repetition, and fragmentation, see *Dub: Sounscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Veal, 2007) and *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Tenchniques, and Ways of Knowing* (Henriques, 2011).

'[…] they eventually went on to become part of their own environmental expression' (Brathwaite, 1984, 31).

Perhaps Eliot appeals to a perceptual model that Johnson already takes from elsewhere, and that Eliot confirms rather than shapes. Is the inspiration Johnson expressed at the English PEN event therefore constructed retrospectively? There are many ways of approaching Eliot's appeal to Johnson. As with Brathwaite, there is a fascination with the musicality of Eliot's poetry. Nevertheless, when Johnson refers to Eliot as 'blues', he also refers to a mood and to something more thematically configured. Frustration, regret, lack of satisfaction and longing may be feelings Johnson reads in Eliot and attributes to blues: 'The muttering retreats/ Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels', 'In the room the women come and go', 'I grow old ….I grow old', 'I am no prophet – and there's no great matter' (Eliot, 1969, 13–16). These lines from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' could be perceived as having a blues quality because of their melancholic first-person perspective which voices personal woes without any clear addressee. Kwame Dawes makes a similar observation when he argues that there are arbitrary class and race biases that determine why Eliot is not considered a performance poet, or that 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is not considered 'street poetry' rather than 'book poetry' (Dawes, 1996).

If Eliot appeals to Johnson's interest in blues, could Eliot also appeal to the Johnson who coined the term dub poetry and is fascinated by reggae? In 'Jamaican Rebel Music', Johnson writes that the 'blues experience and existence' also exists in reggae; 'But along with this "blues" feeling, this inner agony and outer look of dread, there is an urgent desire to tear down the walls of Babylon' (Johnson, 1976, 401). Eliot's use of fire imagery in 'Little Gidding', in 'Four Quartets', suggests that parts of Eliot's symbolism can be perceived as having certain formal characteristics in common with aspects of reggae symbolism, especially reggae's most biblical and apocalyptic imagery of the walls of Babylon falling or

burning. Eliot writes, 'To be redeemed from fire by fire' and 'We only live, only suspire/ Consumed by either fire or fire' (Eliot, 1969, 196). Likewise, Johnson writes: 'DEAD: There is no love no more/ in emotive words…/ only fire…/ ECHO: Fire! fire! fire! fire!' (Johnson, 1988, 9). The poems can be experienced similarly from a formal and relatively ahistorical perspective. The comparison I have made between reggae symbolism and modernism, two of Johnson's core cultural influences, shows the experimental ways of reading and interpreting that can occur, and which both Brathwaite and Johnson exemplify, when modernist poetry is read or heard in a completely different context and from within different perceptual models – than was originally intended. Modernism's abstraction makes it susceptible to unpredictable contextualisations, such as the one espoused by Johnson at the English PEN event.

Johnson's reading of Eliot as 'blues' is indicative of Johnson's formal and aesthetic approach to poetry. Intention and historical context is overshadowed by the experience of the shape and sound of the sentences. Johnson treats Eliot's sentences as formal tools that he is free to re-contextualise within his own perceptual models.[56] He exemplifies how Caribbean poets have a tradition of ascribing unexpected labels to canonical poetry, and of unapologetically appropriating it into their own projects. Brathwaite's appropriation of Eliot as jazz is, as noted, a prime example of this strategy, though we will also encounter it in the work of Glissant and Walcott.

Comparing Brathwaite's appropriation of Eliot as 'jazz' with Johnson's appropriation of Eliot as 'blues' sheds new light on both authors. The comparison shows us that Brathwaite's engagement with the voice in nation language poetry has not only influenced younger generations of poets because of his explicit political message about reclaiming the status of the African presence in the Caribbean. It also shows that his promotion of experimental and avant-gardist artistic strategies such as appropriation has also been

[56] For an expanded understanding of the readymade that includes more than objects see the chapter 'The Readymade and the Tube of Paint' in *Kant After Duchamp* (de Duve, 1996, 147–153).

influential. In his chapter 'Tradition and the Postcolonial Talent: T.S. Eliot versus E.K Brathwaite', Mathew Hart writes that Brathwaite adapts and rewrites Eliot's artistic paradigms (Hart, 2010, 113). Yet, it is essential, I think, that we call this process *appropriatio*n, and that we recognise it as not only a statement about Eliot, but as an artistic device that Caribbean poets, including Johnson, often employ in different scenarios. As we will see later, Glissant similarly appropriates William Faulkner (Glissant, 2000; Glissant, 1989, 68). What could have easily become a purely nationalist, racial, or class-based justification of nation language poetry, Brathwaite opened up into a more general discussion about the political dimension of aesthetic choices and underlying difficulties of distinguishing high from low art. Through strategies like appropriation, he brought attention to why the hierarchical ordering of categories like 'Eliot' or 'jazz', 'oral' or 'written', is arbitrary, and why critics and poets gain more from challenging these categories and from embracing the processes of creolization.

Brathwaite's writing about Caribbean perceptual models in *History of the Voice* exposes, then, some tendencies that we also see at work in Johnson's poetry and criticism: an interest in voice, and the belief that poetry should be rooted in one's own individual experiences and geographical location. We have also seen that this attitude has led to some concrete writing strategies such as appropriations and subversions of the high/low cultural divide. As the following section will argue, Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott deploy similar writing strategies in their work to analogous effects. Furthermore, the subversion of the high/low culture divide will become more evident through a discussion of these examples. By incorporating these recurring schemes, Johnson sustains and adds to some of the core paradigms of a broader post-war Caribbean aesthetic which has relevance beyond the writing of the core members of CAM, as a comparison with Glissant and Walcott will demonstrate.

1.3 Édouard Glissant and LKJ: Remembering Michael Smith

I will now investigate how Johnson and the Martinican poet and literary critic Édouard Glissant partake in the same critical tradition, regardless of their different linguistic position, cultural status, and standing within the canon. Even though Glissant is a Francophone writer, he is similarly interested in defining a Caribbean aesthetic. Glissant, born in 1928, is widely recognised as one of the most respected figures in Caribbean philosophy, and is considered influential in postcolonial theory more generally (Dash, 1995; Britton, 1999). Glissant's idea of creolization, which I will discuss in relation to Johnson, builds on the metaphor of the rhizome, borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's two-volume work, *A Thousand Plateaus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013) [1977, 1987].

First, I want to argue that Glissant's writing helps us to see that Johnson's elevation of reggae lyricism into the realm of poetry, in his article 'Jamaican Rebel Music' (Johnson, 1976), is representative of a common practice in Caribbean poetry and criticism. Glissant brings the dub poet Michael Smith and the reggae superstar Bob Marley into a 'high theory' context. In addition, I demonstrate that he appropriates Faulkner into the category of 'plantation writing' and juxtaposes his work with reggae poetry and lyricism, just as Johnson and Brathwaite do with T.S. Eliot and oral poetry (Glissant, 2000). Second, I explore why Glissant is relevant to understanding Johnson's poetry insofar as he ties the concept of Caribbean aesthetics to the process of creolization and to the Caribbean diasporic experience. Most importantly, he defines creolization as not only an aesthetic, but also as a political process. Glissant sees Caribbean art as a result of cultural amalgamation, which resonates with Johnson's interaction with the punk movement. Akin to Brathwaite and Johnson, and with comparable similarities with Walcott, Glissant insists on using the Caribbean environment, and especially its creole foundation as a model for theorising Caribbean poetry

and its political implications. In this way Glissant shows that the concept of Caribbean perceptual models is not only relevant to the process of writing poetry, but also to prose.

If Glissant tends to be associated with a more abstract French 'high theory' tradition, his style of writing and critical prose is filled with references to the environment and climate of the Caribbean that make it relevant to understanding Anglophone Caribbean poetry. As in Brathwaite's and Walcott's writing, images of the beach and the sea surface regularly in his work (Bonnet and Schon, 2002). In *Poetics of Relation*, two of the chapter titles refer to beaches: 'The Black Beach' and 'The Burning Beach' (Glissant, 1997, 121, 205). Furthermore, there are two epigraphs at the beginning of the book where Glissant quotes both Brathwaite and Walcott's references to the sea:

> *Sea is History*
> Derek Walcott
>
> *The Unity is Sub-marine*
> Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Glissant, 1997, epigraph)

Glissant's combination of epigraphs recognises the affiliation between the two authors, and by referencing them he challenges the Anglophone/Francophone divide – and the national categories – which have often influenced how these writers are read (Dash 1998; Gilroy 1993). Brathwaite's interest in using Caribbean perceptual models is shared by Glissant in his writing on the topic of creolization. Like Brathwaite in his study *Creolization in Jamaica,* Glissant believes that understanding the structures of the slave plantation is key to understanding Caribbean society *and* literature in its current state (Glissant, 1997). His effort to understand Caribbean literature is thus closely related to his attempt to define the characteristics of Caribbean society more widely. It is revealing that these two aspects – understanding the characteristics of a socio-political system and the characteristics of a Caribbean aesthetic – have been closely interlinked in the writing of both Glissant and Brathwaite. However, Glissant takes the analysis of a Caribbean aesthetic, and its political

and social implications, one step further. He broadens our understanding of a Caribbean aesthetics and politics by arguing that cultural encounters in the Caribbean plantation can serve as a micro model of the nature of identity in the globalised world *at large,* or what he refers to as the '*la totalité-monde, les échos-monde,* and *le chaos-monde*' (Glissant, 1997, 91).

This again underscores the point that Johnson's relationship with Brathwaite and CAM puts him in dialogue with the wider Caribbean, and also black diasporic, literary canon. Comparing Glissant to Johnson and Brathwaite is not just done for the sake of gesturing at isolated instances of similarity. Instead, it shows that these critics worked not in a national vacuum, but participated in a diasporic, inter-generational, and transnational Caribbean intellectual space where ideas circulate and travel (Davies, 2013, McLeod, 2006).[57]

In a ten minute film clip by Caecilia Tripp called *Making History* (2008),[58] Johnson and Glissant discuss the nature of diasporic identities. The film is shot in Manhattan, as Glissant's and Johnson's ideas meet each other in a transatlantic intellectual space. Neither of them are American, so Manhattan is foreign terrain, yet also familiar to them due to the history of people of African descent moving between Europe, Africa, North America and the Caribbean (Gilroy, 1993; Dash, 1998). The US location for their face-to-face conversation therefore carries considerable symbolic resonance and highlights their role as poets of the African diaspora.

The clip is a somewhat unnerving to watch because Glissant is very direct when he thinks that Johnson has misunderstood him. Johnson does not seem perturbed by Glissant's corrections and interruptions, nor does he bother to correct Glissant in return. The viewer becomes awkwardly aware of the imbalance between them when it happens for the second

[57] In '"It Dread Inna Inglan": Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread, and Dub Identity' Peter Hitchcock draws parallels between Brathwaite, Glissant and Johnson in respect of their understanding of finding a Caribbean voice. Yet, he writes that 'there is no neat equivalence or complementarity in the formulations of Brathwaite and Glissant' (Hitchcock, 1993, 6). I argue that their emphasis on creating voices rooted in Caribbean perceptual models provides such a complementarity.
[58] *Making History*, 2008, by Caecilia Tripp in co-direction with Katen McKinnon, B3 Media Brixton.

and third time. Johnson speaks in his characteristic no-nonsense and straightforward manner. It is interesting to observe the contrast between their two styles of communication.[59] Glissant insists on keeping the discussion abstract and metaphorical, while Johnson repeatedly attempts to make it grounded and accessible. Sometimes it is hard to follow their conversation or to decipher whether they reach points of agreement or talk past one other. In many ways, the film can be read as a metaphor for their relationship: they are certainly having a conversation, but the communication remains patchy and uneven. Nevertheless, the points at which their interests do coincide reveal that Glissant's thought allows for a deeper understanding of Johnson's poetry, regardless of the extent of Johnson's conscious engagement with it.

Interestingly, Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* and Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* are both dedicated to the dub poet Michael Smith. Smith surfaces in Glissant's writing as a crucial literary figure in his exploration of a Caribbean aesthetic. The dedications to Smith show that dub poetry has been closely linked to theoretical discussions about aesthetics in the Caribbean. If Johnson and Glissant have not previously been considered in the same context, the dedications to Smith shows that dub poetry has been at the centre of discussions about Caribbean aesthetics from the 1960s onwards. In October 2007, Johnson and Glissant also participated on the same Frieze panel dedicated to Smith's poetry.[60] Glissant's writing shows that there is something about dub poetry that invites philosophical reflection on the nature of a Caribbean aesthetic, as Michael Bucknor also observes when describing dub poetry as a self-reflexive art form (Bucknor, 2011, 258). Although Glissant does not integrate reggae into

[59] Their contrasting styles of communication has also been noted by the Frieze blog when they were on the same panel: 'The subsequent Q&A session was also notable mainly for its failures in communication, and not merely resulting from language barriers. Rather than any exchange, what became apparent was the huge difference in Johnson and Glissant's approaches. Johnson came across as a practical figure, firmly rooted in the problems of the here and now, while Glissant is a self-confessed ideas man'. Online source: https://frieze.com/article/%C3%A9douard-glissant-and-linton-kwesi-johnson [05.05, 14.32]. First Published in Issue 110, October 2007.
[60] Online source: https://frieze.com/article/%C3%A9douard-glissant-and-linton-kwesi-johnson [05.05, 14.36].

his writing until the 1990s, after Johnson's main body of work was produced, Glissant's contributions show how Johnson's poetic project and focus on reggae is symptomatic of the increased status of reggae throughout Caribbean intellectual life, beyond the discipline-specific study of dub poetry or Anglophone Caribbean national language poetry.

By including Michael Smith in *Poetics of Relation (*English translation of original French title *Poétique de la Relation*), Glissant subverts high/low cultural distinctions, resonating with Johnson's celebration of the dub lyricist as the 'DJ turned poet' (Johnson, 1976, 398). Glissant does not create a hierarchy between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture in his criticism, and he appropriate canonical Anglo-American literature in order to make an argument about Caribbean writing – a tactic shared with Brathwaite and Johnson. The American South writer William Faulkner has a particularly special place in Glissant's criticism (Glissant, 2000; Loichot, 2007). According to Glissant, Faulkner's writing shares much with Caribbean plantation literature: 'No matter which region we contemplate from among those covered by the system, we find the same trajectory and almost the same forms of expression' (Glissant, 1989, 68). For Glissant, the plantation both an enclosed space and yet reliant on its relation to the external world: 'they are dependent, by nature, on someplace elsewhere' (Glissant, 1989, 67). In this way, the plantation becomes a suitable image for Glissant's core ideas about the poetics of relation. The plantation, like poetry, consists of an 'autonomous' enclosed unity. However, this unity is inherently dependent on the outside world. Glissant mentions Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* as an example of plantation literature due to its portrayal of the relationship between white and black characters: 'The claim that they were reciprocally extraneous did not prevent contamination, inevitable within the enclosure of the plantation' (Glissant, 1989, 67). The plantation reveals that 'contamination' still occurs in spaces where cultural and racial mixing is extremely taboo. Glissant appropriates Faulkner to develop the argument that these interrelationships are

unavoidable, even when strictly monitored and prohibited. By focusing on the genre of plantation writing, he challenges the idea that 'Faulkner' and 'Caribbean literature' belong to separate categories. By seeing these two 'in relation', he also challenges the notion that there is a hierarchy between 'major' Anglo-American writing and 'peripheral' or 'minor' Caribbean writing. Interested in Caribbean appropriations of canonical 20th-century writers, Glissant makes provocative juxtapositions, such as when he questions the distinction between Bob Marley and Ezra Pound:

> William Faulkner's work, Bob Marley's songs, the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot, are all *écheos-monde*. Wilfredo Lam's painting (flower together) or that of Roberto Matta (tearing apart); the architecture of Chicago and just as easily the shantytowns of Rio or Caracas; Ezra Pound's Cantos but also the marching of schoolchildren in Soweto are *échoes monde* (Glissant, 1989, 93).

Here Marley and Pound are both configured as 'world' poets with unique voices that resonate with the rest of the world, which in turn challenges the hierarchy between the written and the spoken. This is yet another example of how Caribbean writers have had a tendency to create unpredictable contextualisations of canonical poets and reggae artists or dub poets, and the juxtaposition of Marley and Pound refers us back to Johnson's interest in both dub and Eliot. In addition, Glissant emphasises the relationship between poetry and non-poetry. By juxtaposing 'Pound's *Cantos'* with 'the architecture in Chicago', 'the shantytowns of Rio', and 'the marching of schoolchildren in Soweto', he makes it clear that poetry is ultimately connected to everyday perception, the various sights and sounds of the world. Poetry is a product of our capability to sense and to experience different environments and landscapes. Although one is a product of experience and the other is something experienced, poetry and shantytowns remain intimately related for Glissant. In this way, he brings attention, like Brathwaite, to the *synaesthetic* dimension of poetry. He ultimately views poetry as evoking the multi-sensory experience of the world through language. When Marley and Pound are compared, they are placed on the same synaesthetic field. Mary Lou Emery describes the 'synaesthetic language' in Wilson Harris's writing as crossing 'from one sense, such as the

eye, to another, such as the ear' (Emery, 2007, 230). Brathwaite's writing about perceptual models is therefore embedded in a wider synaesthetic tradition in the Caribbean.

The discussion of both Marley and Michael Smith in *Poetics of Relation* demonstrates why Johnson's discussions about the aesthetics of reggae and dub need to be understood as dealing with a subset of questions that exist under the umbrella of a Caribbean aesthetic, to which Glissant is a key contributor. The integration of reggae into discourses about Caribbean aesthetics has moved beyond the niche area of reggae studies, and Glissant's reference to Marley suggests that he, like Brathwaite, does not respect the boundaries that often isolate discussions about popular culture from fine art or literature. It also shows how Glissant puts music and poetry on the same plane: they are both sensuous or aesthetic forms. As Glissant's dedication to Smith at the beginning of the *Poetics of Relation* reveals, dub poets like Smith and Johnson are voices that emerge from within the wider Caribbean diaspora: 'for Michael Smith, assassinated poet for the archipelagos laden with palpable death' (Glissant, 1999, dedication). Dub poets do not simply represent Anglophone Caribbean voices: according to Glissant, dub poets produce a Caribbean aesthetic that is influenced by the whole archipelago.

I will now elaborate on Glissant's theory of creolization to emphasise the political dimension of a creolized Caribbean poetry. These arguments about creolization are particularly relevant to understanding Johnson's interaction with punk and the political implications of this collaboration, to which the next chapter will turn. For Glissant, the process of cultural creolization is the main characteristic of Caribbean society *and* of Caribbean art. Creolization, the key concept of his work, thus simultaneously describes artistic and political processes. His understanding of cultural creolization as a socio-political process more generally on the one hand, and as an aesthetic process through the 'poetics of

relation' more specifically on the other, are deeply interwoven in his writing.[61] According to Glissant, this 'relation' is most clearly seen in the Caribbean, and in the concept of creolization (Glissant, 1997, 33). As Brathwaite's rejection of iambic pentameter, Glissant uses the Caribbean environment and landscape as a model to create a theory of poetry, one that he calls a 'poetics of relation' (Glissant, 1997). Even though Glissant does not use the term 'perceptual models', Brathwaite's terminology can help us to decode Glissant's work. Glissant is, like Brathwaite and later Johnson, trying to define a Caribbean aesthetic, and 'creolization' is his main contribution to the question of what such an aesthetic might entail.[62]

Glissant argues that decolonization will only be complete when colonised subjects stop thinking of themselves in opposition to the colonizer (Britton, 1999, 23). Creolization is the inherent condition of all identity formation, and the idea of 'pure' identities is therefore a colonial myth, according to Glissant. All identity is constructed through its relation to 'the whole'/'the world': 'Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other' (Glissant, 1997, 11). A conceptualisation of the Caribbean is not possible without seeing the region in relation to the rest of the world. Analogously, *Poetics of Relation* suggests that all poetry grows out of its interaction with, and relation to, poetry from all over the world, and of course through its interaction with and relation to the world itself. In this way, the autonomy and heteronomy of a poem are seen as interdependent categories, just as the autonomy and heteronomy of identity are connected and mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, Glissant also crucially demonstrates, on the basis of a related paradoxical logic, that creolization is both a characteristic of a Caribbean aesthetic and a feature of all culture. Johnson's engagement with the Caribbean canon, as well as with British

[61] Michael Dash refers to Glissant's writing as an 'aesthetic theory' while he also emphasises his political engagement: 'it would be a distortion to treat Glissant's concerns at this time as exclusively literary' (Dash, 1995, 13).
[62] For a more extended comparison of Brathwaite's and Glissant's interest in creolization, see Nicole King's *CLR James and Creolization: Circles of Influence* (King, 2001).

contemporary culture such as the punk movement, shows that his poetic identity was very much created in dialogue or 'relation' to, these different cultural products. Johnson's poetry is therefore constituted from these many relations to both other poems and to the world itself. In 'Reality Poem', Johnson expresses a special interest in poetry's ability to represent real-life experiences: 'dis is di age af reality' (Johnson, 2006, 35). His self-conscious engagement with these many different relations, while at the same time locating himself within the parameters of Caribbean poetry, suggests that Glissant's notion of creolization furthers our understanding of Johnson's perception of himself as a Caribbean poet influenced by a wide source of both Caribbean and non-Caribbean sources.

According to Glissant then, no identity, or work of poetry, has an essential meaning, because the process of meaning-making is intrinsically a result of creolization and relation. The most important thing to bear in mind in this chapter, however, is that creolization, according to Glissant, takes place both on a socio-political macro level and on the aesthetic micro level of poetry. As I have been arguing, relation is something that happens between the poem and the world, as well as between a poem and other poems. It also happens *within* a poem, between the different cultural traces upon which it draws.

One of the interesting things about Glissant's theory is that 'the Other' is not singular, but rather itself constituted from many different identities: 'One way ashore, a thousand channels' (Glissant, 1997, 3). Identity cannot be traced back to a single root, but is rather something rhizomatic constructed through many different sets of networks and relationships. As I contend in the next chapter's discussion of Johnson's relationship with punk, he offers a compelling example of a Caribbean poet whose influences cannot be traced back to *one* root. Though critics have tended to portray Johnson's poetry as culturally monolithic, his Caribbean aesthetic is best understood as a web of different influences. The British rapper

Roots Manuva describes Johnson as a 'mutant hybrid', arguing that Johnson influenced his creolized expression:

> The legacy of Linton Kwesi Johnson is, to me, beyond words. How strange for there not to be the correct emotional gravity, expressible in simple English, to communicate the impact of this literary giant. Sadly, today's obsession with genre-specification has disconnected the tapestry of his work from its spider's web influence in the UK and beyond (Manuva, 2013).

Manuva description of Johnson's work as a 'tapestry' and 'spider's web' of influences recalls Glissant's emphasis on the rhizomatic nature of Caribbean poetry. Johnson's poetry therefore implicitly grapples with many of the same interests as a more theoretical figure such as Glissant. As the 'Making History' clip shows, Johnson and Glissant both engage in conversations about the composite nature of identity, even though they address these questions through different strategies and modes. Johnson deals with these questions *through* his poetic work; Glissant explicitly discusses these issues in his critical prose, whilst also practising them in his poetry.

What, then, are the political implications of Johnson and Glissant's shared interest in creolization? To put it simply, along with Brathwaite, Glissant provides a theory with which we can better conceptualise the relationship between aesthetics and politics at work in Johnson's poetry. Curiously, Glissant attempts to clarify this relationship by comparing poems to computers. Poetic works, like computers, are also 'composed as systems'(Glissant, 1989, 82). It is in this comparison between computers and poetry that the connection between politics and poetics become particularly striking. Poetry, like politics, composes a system that determines the frameworks, screens, and conditions for how we perceive and experience the world.[63]

For Glissant, cultural encounters and relationships create transformations that are wide-reaching, and that project new meanings into both the past and the future. Glissant

[63] Brathwaite also demonstrates an interest in exploring the aesthetics of computers and technology in his 'sycorax video style' poems (Noland and Watten, 2011, 77–97).

stresses that these transformations occur in art as well as in society, and the relationship between the change at these two levels is key. *Poetics of Relation* argues that poetry and politics are interlinked because they can both transform relationships between categories. According to this logic, poetry has a political dimension because it transforms or rearranges the meaning of categories in the world, or what Glissant goes so far to refer to as the 'universe' (Glissant, 1997, 94). Politics and poetry both intervene into our shared way of ordering, categorising, and separating things in the world.[64] Poetry transforms our experience of the world by juxtaposing perspectives that have previously not been compared; poetry can portray people and objects in a new, unfamiliar, or strange way, and therefore it can reorder, restructure, or adjust how we see and experience the status, meaning and significance of these subjects and objects. To illustrate this, Glissant writes that narratives can 'gather stones and weave the materiality of the universe' (Glissant, 1997, 42). 'Weaving' is an expressive metaphor describing how poetic relation functions in Glissant's writing. He describes poetry as something that intervenes in the material world; it gathers stones and weaves it into the text. This can be seen as a circular movement that in turn also weaves poetry into the material world. The text and the world is therefore seen as fundamentally interwoven, and so the poetry is political because it reorders or weaves together environments and experiences in new ways.

It is the emphasis on poetry as resulting from sensory perception and creating sensory experiences, and seeing the world as primarily experienced through the senses, that make this weaving possible: 'The Poetics of Relation (which is, therefore, part of the *aesthetics* of the *chaos-monde*) senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the

[64] In *Caribbean Critique: Antillian Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*, Nick Nesbitt emphasises that Glissant's later work represents an 'aesthetic-descriptive' understanding of relation. He defines this aesthetic-descriptive mode as '[…] the encompassing sense of a sensual experiencing-the-world-as-totality taken to constitute the elemental – and perhaps unsurpassable – mode of human being' (Nesbitt, 2013, 231). This manifests the importance of recognising the role of aesthetics, defined specifically as sensory perception, in his writing.

thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion' (Glissant, 1989, 95, my emphasis). Glissant sees poetry as a gathering, collecting, reordering, and reshuffling of the physical world. Recognising the relationship between poetry and the world at large is also essential to understanding Johnson's concept of bass culture, which I will discuss in the third chapter. Johnson's poetry expresses the belief that bass in poetry, and in music, can make interventions or 'weave' itself into the culture and a wider socio-polical context; that is, bass and culture merge.

The whole notion of a world poetics of relation deriving from the Caribbean plantation society is based on an attempt at creating an understanding of poetry that links it to the physical world. It is revealing that Glissant explicitly uses the term 'aesthetics' in his writing, and ties it to a set of different socio-political landscapes:

> An aesthetics of the earth? In the half-starved dust of Africas? In the mud of flooded Asias? In epidemics, masked forms of exploitation, flies buzz-bombing the skeleton skins of children? In the frozen silence of the Andes? In the rains uprooting *favelas* and shantytowns? In the scrub and scree of Bantu lands? In flowers encircling necks and ukuleles? In mud huts crowning goldmines? In city sewers? (Glissant, 1989, 151).

Glissant again emphasises that literary style or form results from the perceptual experiences we have of our surrounding environment. An 'aesthetic of the earth' implies that literature is deeply worldly, bodily, and material. Literature evokes earth, dust, flowers, mud, and bodies. When Brathwaite calls for perceptual models closer to the hurricane than the snow, his statement resonates with Glissant's idea of an aesthetics of the earth, speaking to the idea that literature is inherently tied to its material surroundings. Therefore all literature, according to Brathwaite, includes and excludes certain experiences, certain places, and ultimately certain living subject and agents who can perceive the world. Glissant's phrase 'aesthetics of the earth' describes how the experience from different geographies offer different aesthetic models – or more precisely perceptual models – for writing poetry or creating art. Glissant, Johnson, and Brathwaite create a direct link between poetry and common experience, and aesthetics defined as sensory perception is the concept they use to tie the two together. Many

Caribbean critics have chosen to use the term aesthetics when talking about poetry exactly because it links poetry to sensory perception more generally.

As we saw earlier, the interest in the beach is exemplified in Brathwaite's poem 'Coral' in *Islands*. Glissant, too, integrates Caribbean perceptual models of the beach and the sea into his work and thought: 'The movement of the beach, this rhythmic rhetoric of a shore, do not seem to me gratuitous. The weave and circularity that draws me in' (Glissant, 1989, 122). According to Glissant the shore is 'rhetoric'. Glissant implies that the Caribbean environment and landscape can inspire, or even itself embodies, rhetorical properties and patterns – which is to say, poetry: the hurricane embodies a rhythm that is not iambic pentameter. Glissant also writes that the Caribbean economy 'should maybe be more like the beach' (Glissant, 1989, 125). Caribbean perceptual models can change and restructure not only poetic form, but also the *form* of the society of which they are a part. Hence, he sees the Caribbean beach as something that serves as an alternative model not only for poetry, but also for economics. Glissant's multi-layered repetition of beach imagery links aesthetics, poetry, politics, and economics. Glissant's emphasis on the political potential of the sea, which we also find in the work of Brathwaite and Walcott, is also significant because Johnson largely moves away from these tropical tropes while subscribing to the same mentality when he integrates his British environment into his poetry: 'dem have a likkle facktri up inna Brackly' (Johnson, 2006, 40). In summary, Glissant helps us to see how Johnson's poetry, particularly his use of appropriation and subversion of high and low culture, and the emphasis on the political implications of creolized aesthetics, reflects central tendencies in Caribbean criticism – beyond the realm of Anglophone national language poetry. Yet, as Walcott will help us to see more clearly, these insights about Johnson's work that Glissant provides us with are dualistic in that they identify something particular to

Caribbean aesthetics, even as they simultaneously make widely applicable claims about poetry in general.

1. 4. Derek Walcott and LKJ: The Militancy of 'True' Voice

> 'What to do then? Where to turn? How to be true?' (Walcott, 1998, 33).

Johnson includes Derek Walcott in the group of poets he considers a part of his own personal canon (Johnson, 2006, 94). To further illustrate that Johnson's continues some of the core tendencies about a Caribbean aesthetic, including appropriation and the use of Caribbean perceptual models, I now want to explore how Johnson enters into dialogue with Walcott, arguably one of the most influential Anglophone Caribbean poets of the 20th-century. Such a comparison shows how Caribbean poets have long been attempting to understand the relationship between poetry and the liberation of the Caribbean subject. Despite their differences, Johnson and Walcott are united in their conviction that poetry is able to militantly assert a sincere, genuine, and *authentic* Caribbean voice, but they both draw an important distinction between authenticity and 'purity'. Walcott is therefore the Caribbean writer who best encapsulates the paradox of a Caribbean aesthetic – a paradox which also, of course, emerges in Johnson's writing. Walcott writes poetry rooted in Caribbean perceptual models such as tropicality, while simultaneously underlining the importance of the individual 'dialect', 'accent' and 'vocabulary' (Walcott, 1998, 70). Likewise, Johnson writes poetry rooted in Caribbean thematic and stylistic conventions. Yet, he opposes notions of purity and introduces new and seemingly foreign elements into Caribbean poetry, such as punk. Walcott's work helps us to understand that it is Johnson's inclusion of not only his 'Jamaicanness', but also his 'Britishness', that makes him a Caribbean poet in the true and authentic sense.

The Caribbean is viewed in Johnson's and Walcott's writing as fostering a particular Caribbean approach to writing, in which the category of Caribbean poetry is not primarily defined by a set of fixed stylistic features. Rather, both method and content are seen as central to the creation of authentic Caribbean poetry. To be authentically Caribbean, the poetry needs to be rooted in some of the conventions of Caribbean poetry, but it also needs to reflect something of the individual. Redolent of Glissant, Walcott offers a conceptual framework through which Johnson can be defined as Caribbean writer, even as he writes from a specifically British context.[65] Johnson both is and is *not* a Caribbean poet, but this paradox in fact makes him an authentically Caribbean poet according to Walcott's definition.

To appreciate the usefulness of a 'Caribbean aesthetic' as an umbrella term used by Johnson, among others, I argue that we have to interrogate the features that these two Caribbean poets have in common, despite their differing status and public image. When we compare Johnson's work to more traditionally accepted Caribbean poets such as Walcott, the term Caribbean aesthetics becomes particularly useful. Such comparison brings attention to the overarching methodological tendencies present in their work despite their many stylistic differences, and points to the metacritical tendencies with which Johnson's critical writing and commentary has long been engaged (because of, rather than despite of, the general and abstract focus of these attempts at defining a Caribbean aesthetic). First, I will show that Walcott highlights the importance of Johnson's interest in integrating British cultural forms because he emphasises that poetry, including its formal features, have a militant potential when it speaks the *truth*. Walcott's emphasis on truth, evidenced in this section's epigraph, resonates with the importance of authenticity in Brathwaite's and in Johnson's work. I will then turn to a discussion of the ways in which Walcott promotes a radically inclusive rather than purist understanding of an authentic Caribbean aesthetic. This helps us to understand

[65] In 1991, Walcott was a guest on BBC's radio programme Dessert Island Discs. He included both Bob Marley and Frederic Chopin on his playlist, demonstrating that appropriation and juxtaposition run through his careeer in many different arenas. Online Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0093z3h [05.05, 16.35].

why Johnson identifies as a Caribbean artist even though he criticises British artists who simply copy Caribbean styles, as the second chapter will explore further.

The Nobel Prize-winner Derek Walcott was not a member of the Caribbean Artist Movement, but he is still a prominent figure in Anne Walmsley's in-depth study *The Caribbean Artist Movement: 1966–1972: A Literary and Cultural History*. Despite not being a member nor even being physically present at their meetings, he was an important point of reference for many of the debates held by CAM, and he was often quoted during discussions. Walcott and Brathwaite were colleagues at The University of West Indies' Mona Campus in the summer of 1964, when Brathwaite wrote the first draft of *Rights of Passage.* Brathwaite recalls that 'Derek Walcott, Errol Hill, Fred Cartey, CLR James – responded with lively interest to what they read and above all to what they heard' (Walmsley, 1998, 41). Walcott also wrote for *Savacou*, the journal of the Caribbean Artist Movement.[66] In addition, he was a regular on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme in the 1950s, during the same period as Brathwaite (Kalliney, 2007). The geographical, social, and occasional ideological proximity between Walcott and other Caribbean writers associated with CAM explains his lasting influence on CAM's development, which in turn motivated Johnson's self-conscious engagement with a Caribbean aesthetic (Walmsley, 1992; McGill, 2003; Stewart, 1993).

Walcott provides yet another reason to reconsider the usefulness of the distinctions between Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean writing, and the hierarchies between 'high' and 'low' status poetry in the Caribbean tradition when approaching general questions about Caribbean aesthetics, as well as when decoding Johnson's stylistic references. My suggestion that there is a spectrum in Caribbean poetry from popular to 'high-brow', on which both Johnson and Walcott can be located depending on our contextualisation of their stylistic

[66] See, for instance, 'Meanings' in Savacou No. 2 where he writes about the conditions for running a theatre company and being a poet in the Caribbean. The article opens with Walcott describing his parents, who he viewed as creative people, and who inspired him to become a poet (Walcott, 1970, 45–51).

choices, is a point to which I will return in this chapter's closing section by referring to Gordon Rohlehr's theory of aesthetic continuum in the Caribbean (Rohlehr, 1985).

Highlighting Johnson's and Walcott's shared interest in militancy, and its relationship to authenticity, Walcott argues in 'What the Twilight Says' that there is a close relationship between militancy and poetry: 'The future of West Indian militancy lies in art' (Walcott, 1998, 16). Johnson has similarly expressed that poetry is 'a cultural weapon' (Wroe, 2008). However, if we look at Walcott's often esoteric qualities, his understanding of radicalism might seem to differ starkly from the straightforward provocation and agitation often associated with Johnson's work. Walcott's writing may even, at times, come across as hostile towards what he calls 'polemic' or 'radical' poets:

> A new conservatism now appears, a new dignity more reactionary and pompous than the direction of the language used. It moves manically between the easy applause of dialect, the argot of the tribe and ceremonial speech, the "memory" of the tribe; that is, between the new dignity and the popular, and inbetween there is nothing (Walcott, 1998, 59).

Walcott rejects understandings of dialect (what Brathwaite calls nation language) which claim an inherent radicality regardless of the context in which it is used. He goes as far as calling the indiscriminate use of dialect potentially 'reactionary'. Johnson is one of the Caribbean poets most closely associated with militancy and dialect, and is 'one the best-known black polemical artist/activists in Britain [*sic*]' (Donnell, 2001, 180). Although Walcott's criticism is not directed at Johnson, it might certainly be applicable if we consider Johnson's tabloid reputation as an 'angry' and confrontational rioter (Reid, 2011). Considering their respective public images, Walcott and Johnson could be treated as ideological and artistic counterparts in Anglophone Caribbean poetry. Yet, as is fundamental to the argument of this thesis throughout, many beliefs and approaches unite these poets and encourage us to see Johnson's work as closely related to Walcott's project.

Looking at Walcott's writing reveals another definitive example of how Caribbean critics, both Anglophone and Francophone, have explored the relationship between poetic

voice and politics. Brathwaite's idea of the political implication of using Caribbean perceptual models is therefore also highly relevant to Walcott's writing (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). Brathwaite and Walcott both ask how Caribbean poets can be true to their own experience and convictions, moving beyond what Walcott describes as, 'the sweated blurring of a mirror in which the people might have found their true reflection' (Walcott, 1998, 35). If we accept that the militant political potential in Caribbean poetry resides in the expression of a 'true' self that has been 'blurred', then Brathwaite and Walcott have slightly different views of what qualifies as a 'true self', and as subsequently authentic Caribbean models. Brathwaite focuses mainly on the need to reclaim the black and African presence in the Caribbean (Brathwaite, 1971, 311). For his part, Walcott argues that one equally has to accept the influence of Europe.[67] Of crucial importance to my argument about why Brathwaite, Johnson, and Walcott need to be seen in relation to one another is that, regardless of their diverging opinions, they pose the same question: 'How to be true? (Walcott, 1998, 33). The quest to find a sincere and authentic representation of the Caribbean self is a problem with which Johnson grapples through his attempts to give voice to a specifically Black British experience, rather than simply reproducing the conventions of Caribbean poetry.[68] Johnson and Walcott share the conviction that the poet should give voice to their own authentic experiences, even when these *break away* from the established expectations of a previously accepted Caribbean style. By including the Black British experience, Johnson questions narrow understandings of Caribbean identity and explores the outer boundaries of the category of 'Caribbean poetry'. Moreover, both poets embrace the idea that Europe is central to Caribbean writing. For Walcott, Europe's relevance is due to the region's colonial past (Walcott, 1974). For Johnson, by contrast, Europe is key because of his focus on the Black

[67] Brathwaite also embraces the European presence in the Caribbean, as his approprition of T.S Eliot shows. Yet, Brathwaite has a stronger emphasis on reclaiming the suppressed African elements than Walcott (Pollard, 2004).
[68] For a more detailed discussion of the role of authenticity in dub poetry see 'Poet and the Roots: Authenticity in the Works of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah' (Bousquet, 2012, 187–206).

British experience whereby Caribbean identity is no longer located and defined only within the geographical or social boundaries of the Caribbean: 'up in Bradford Toun/ but di Bradford Blacks/ dem a rally roun' (Johnson, 2006, 25).

Walcott demonstrates that Caribbean poetry is a complex concept, and Johnson's work exemplifies this complexity. In Walcott's writing, 'Caribbeanness' is both expressed through thematic content and motif – for example, through his use of tropical imagery or intermittent vocalisation of adapted patois – and in his more general method of appropriation and borrowing. Yet, the balance between these stylistic and methodological factors vary throughout his *oeuvre*. On the one hand, a poem like 'The Castaway' references the Caribbean through its frequent use of instantly recognisable tropical imagery. On the other hand, a poem like 'The Light of the World', collected in *The Arkansas Testam*ent (1987) (Walcott, 2007, 166–168) – indicatively described by Laurence Breiner as 'Walcott's characteristically bent dub poem' (Breiner, 2005, 38), gives the impression of being Caribbean for a more complex set of reasons. Here, it is not the landscape but rather Walcott's citation of Bob Marley that is germane. The poem can therefore be defined as Caribbean because of its thematisation of reggae sensibility, but equally because of its characteristic Caribbean approach to appropriation and juxtaposition of 'high' and 'low' cultures. [69]

This way of thinking about Caribbean poetry, as both a specific style and a general approach to, or method of writing, is essential to understanding Johnson's turn towards a Black British reggae style and his abandoning of many of the tropical tropes that characterise the writing of the region. Furthermore, it helps us to understand Johnson's specifically British adaptation of Jamaican patois and rhythms. Johnson's *oeuvre* demonstrates what happens to

[69] In addition, the reference to Marley's music evinces that Walcott, like Glissant, views reggae music as a phenomenon that encourages self-conscious reflection about the nature of Caribbean aesthetics – in spite of the fact that these two Caribbean literary giants are seldom associated with the 'reggae intellectualism' of which Johnson is considered a promoter.

the concept of Caribbean poetry when it physically and stylistically leaves the Caribbean: when it is no longer Caribbean in a narrow sense, but is still included within the radically extended inclusive framework which Walcott advocates. Caribbean poetry, for Johnson, is not primarily defined by being written from the Caribbean (although it might have its origins in the Caribbean); rather, it is defined by combining Caribbean styles with other particular methods and strategies suited to one's own locations and predispositions. For Johnson, this location is London, and more specifically, Brixton.

For Walcott, therefore, authentically Caribbean forms of writing interestingly permit the inclusion of 'un-Caribbean' elements. Walcott distances himself from all simplistic dogmas of Caribbean authenticity, especially the belief that dialect is the only authentic and legitimate language for Caribbean writing. Brathwaite's understanding of Caribbean poetry also emphasises complexity and creolization, but he nonetheless stresses that Caribbean culture needs to give a privileged position to its African heritage (Brathwaite, 1971; Pollard, 2004). By contrast, Walcott expresses a strong skepticism towards the idea of reclaiming an African past: 'If one went in search of the African experience, carrying the luggage of a few phrases and a crude map, where would it end? We had no language for the bush and there was a conflicting grammar in the pace of our movement' (Walcott, 1998, 33). According to Walcott, the Caribbean poet's search for his or her African origins is futile because it belongs to a past that cannot be recovered, as the poem 'A Far Cry from Africa', in *In A Green Night* (1962), puts forth (Walcott, 2007, 5). Therefore, although they both emphasise creolization, Walcott's understanding of Caribbean identity is even more open to the inclusion of 'foreign' cultural elements into the notion of Caribbean perceptual models, and he thus aids us in seeing the paradoxical nature of Johnson's work more clearly than if Brathwaite's impact on Johnson is considered in isolation.

Regardless of Walcott's emphasis on the complex and composite nature of the Caribbean experience, his writing's reliance on typical markers of Caribbean fauna, landscape, and environment is in fact also relevant to Johnson's work. Just as Johnson uses markers such as dub and nation language, Walcott does not dismiss familiar or conventional symbols of Caribbean identity – however, nor does he equate the uncritical use of these symbols with authenticity irrespective of whether it is true to the poet's own perceptions and individual voice. It might be argued that Walcott speaks a more conventionally Caribbean poetic language than does Johnson in his depictions of urban London, at least in Walcott's 'Caribbean phase' from 1948 to 1979 (Ismond, 2001, 1). However, this difference can be seen as an expression of their attempts to write in an authentically Caribbean manner, that is, one that responds to their own respective environments.

Akin to the other poets and critics mentioned in this chapter, Walcott's poetry is inspired by his direct experiences in and of the Caribbean in ways that are immediately recognisable. When Walcott describes the dialects of the Archipelago as being as fresh as 'the condensation of a refreshing element, rain and salt' (Walcott, 1998, 70), he uses a familiar images like 'salt' which connote the common trope of the Caribbean beach and sea.[70] In 'What the Twilight Says' (1998), Walcott opens by describing the highly sensory and visual, almost sensual, impressions of his native St. Lucia: 'When dusk heightens, like amber on a set stage, those ramshackle hoardings of wood and rusting iron which circle our cities, a theatrical sorrow rises with it, for the glare, like the aura from an old-fashioned brass lamp, is like a childhood symbol to come home' (Walcott, 1998, 1). In Walcott's poetry, the sensuous environment 'speaks'. The twilight 'says', and inanimate things are given the ability through different kinds of metaphorical construction to express meaning: 'the twilight became a metaphor for the withdrawal of empire', writes Walcott (Walcott, 1998, 4). This again

[70] See Earl Lovelace's *Salt* (1997) for another example of this kind of image drawn from the beach and the sea.

reminds us of the political dimension of the synaesthetic qualities of Caribbean writing, one that recurs in Johnson's emphasis on bass culture to be discussed in more detail in the third chapter: 'yet still breedin love/ far more mellow/ than di soun of shapes/ chanting loudly' (Johnson, 2006, 15–16). Visual shapes are given auditory qualities, and landscapes are invested with linguistic meanings.

By drawing attention to the metaphoric function of the twilight, Walcott, like Brathwaite, forges an intimate link between Caribbean tropical environments and poetic expressions. Brathwaite's concept of perceptual models, and Glissant's concept of 'relation', speak to Walcott's writing because they use the Caribbean, its history and geography, to say something general about the mimetic nature of poetry. Walcott writes that 'poetry is an island that breaks way from the main' (Walcott, 1998, 70), and by doing so he finds ways of thinking and talking about poetry which is rooted in his perceptible island environment. In this vein, Katie Jones argues that Walcott resurrects 'landscape poetry' (Jones, 1991, 37). Sentences including 'as climate meets its style' and 'verse crisp as sand' (Walcott, 2007, 16) weave the Caribbean environment, climate, and ecology into the formal or stylistic features of poetry. As I suggested earlier, it is no coincidence that many Caribbean poets have preferred the term 'aesthetics' to other comparable terms, such as 'poetics', when they have described poetry. It is the former concept that allows them to explore literature's relationship to non-literature, as we see here.

Overshadowing all of these conventions is Walcott's emphasises that authenticity, and the militancy following from it, stems from the individual voice. It depends on who the poet is and the position the poet inhabits, and it cannot be purely determined by a fixed style or expected use of dialect:

> There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one excavation and of self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect; it shapes its own accent, its own vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of Ozymandias, libraries and dictionaries, law courts and critics, and churches, universities, political dogma, the diction of institutions (Walcott, 1998, 70).

Walcott, like Brathwaite, is interested in dialect as something that resists imperial and colonial norms, 'the diction of institutions'. Yet, he describes the individual voice as a dialect, implying that dialect is not simply referring to nation language. Walcott seems to believe that all individual voices have a 'tone' or rhythm, which can be understood as a dialect. This is surprising because dialect, often seen as specific to Caribbean poetry in this context, typically freights the expectation that it refers to creole languages. However, by emphasising 'the individual vocabulary' and introducing a much more general use of the term, he renders Caribbean poetry receptive to 'un-Caribbean' expressions. Relatedly, Fred D'Aguiar argues that Walcott creates an 'art of duality' (D'Aguiar, 1991, 159). He is the 'mulatto of style': 'In that schizophrenic boyhood one could lead two lives: the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect' (D'Aguiar, 1991, 159). D'Aguiar's observation helps us to understand how Walcott's use of dialect upholds and unifies two separate meanings, one Caribbean and the other more universally applicable. Walcott attempts to give voice to the life of the Caribbean subject located in the Caribbean, but he also offers a concept that can carry meaning, and integrate elements, irrespective of this particular location. As we will see in chapter three, where I focus on the relationship between singular identities and universalist philosophies in reggae, this duality is also found in a concept like bass culture.

Walcott's definition of dialect carries a double meaning that reminds us of the dual concepts also found in Glissant's and Brathwaite's writing. Brathwaite's concept of perceptual models is similarly intended to suggest that Caribbean poets should produce 'indigenous' forms, but it can also be understood as an artistic principle applicable to all writing. Likewise, Glissant's understanding of relation is based on the idea of the Caribbean as a creole region, even as it frames relation as the main component of all identity formation.

There is a therefore a critical tendency in Caribbean writing to generate concepts attempting to describe something specific about Caribbean culture, while also functioning as a framework or method that can be universally applicable. Johnson belongs to a Caribbean aesthetic with recurring thematic and formal features of dialect, rhythm, and tropical tropes, but he can therefore also introduce new themes and features without ceding his claim to be an authentically Caribbean poet. Fundamentally, this is because he displays a Caribbean approach towards and method of writing, which could be used to create many literary forms. Caribbean criticism allows the specifically Caribbean, on the one hand, and the universal, on the other hand, to combine in fascinating ways. This is a duality which Walcott's writing exemplifies in its use of conventional 'tropical tropes' alongside its insistence on every poet's 'individual tone and self-discovery'. When Walcott distances himself from the 'polemic' and 'radical' poets, Johnson might be thought of as an opponent. Yet, a comparison between them demonstrates that they are united in their belief that Caribbean poetry can contain, and even in some instances must contain, non-Caribbean elements and individual dialects in order to be authentically Caribbean.

1.5 Gordon Rohlehr: Dub Poetry and the Caribbean Aesthetic Continuum

In this chapter's concluding section, I want to return to its initial focus. It began with the Caribbean Artist Movement's first public meeting, in 1967, titled 'dialogue on the WI aesthetic' (Walmsley, 1992, 51). One participant at that seminal meeting, and an active member in the movement, was Gordon Rohlehr, to whose criticism I now turn. Rohlehr was another critic to help centre conversations about a Caribbean aesthetic, and he was one of the first critics to thoroughly engage with reggae music in an academic context. Prior to that, he

was a prominent promoter of calypso, another form of Caribbean popular music.[71] Most importantly, Rohlehr is, apart from Frantz Fanon, the only critic Johnson actually cites in his formative article, 'Jamaican Rebel Music', in which he first attempts to define dub poetry: 'Gordon Rohlehr, the West Indian critic, has commented on the fierceness of "the forces of despair and erosion" that permeate Jamaican society and culture, and its relation to the music' (Johnson, 1976, 400).

To begin, I will discuss how Rohlehr's writing enables us to see how studies of dub poetry became embedded in CAM's wider discussions about a Caribbean aesthetic. Similarly, it also helps us to map the early definitions of dub poetry – Johnson's defence of dub poetry therefore needs to be read in relation to CAM's broader project. Thereafter, by looking to Rohlehr's concept of the *aesthetic continuum,* I will argue that Johnson's reference to the Caribbean literary canon and appropriation of T.S.Eliot, in combination with reggae music, is again characteristic of Caribbean poetry. As we have seen, Glissant, Walcott, Brathwaite, and the Caribbean Artist Movement all attempt to clarify what a Caribbean aesthetic might be. Some of the tendencies we have observed so far include the promotion of Caribbean perceptual models inspired by the Caribbean environment, and in appropriating other poets into those models; the subversion of the distinction between high and low culture; and defining a Caribbean aesthetic as both an authentic Caribbean method of writing, *and* a label designating thematic content or formal features as authentically Caribbean. Contributing to these continuities and tendencies, Gordon Rohlehr contends that there are not two aesthetic camps in the Caribbean, consisting of the 'great' and 'little' tradition (Brathwaite, 1984). Caribbean literature is, on the contrary, characterised by a constant exploration of an aesthetic continuum between 'high' and 'low' culture, and between modernism and folk art. This

[71] He is particularly noted for his article 'Sparrow and the Language of Calypso' in Savacou no. 2, September 1970.

aesthetic continuum is a result of the interaction between two slightly different Caribbean perceptual models, according to Rohlehr: the urban and the rural (Rohlehr, 1985).

Conflict and disagreement about the quality of Caribbean nation language poetry in the 1970s, and dub poetry more specifically, are tied to overarching and diverging understandings among Caribbean critics of how the term 'aesthetic' and its cognates should be used. Rohlehr's inclusive understanding of the term, also found in Brathwaite's writing during the CAM years, anticipates Johnson's later understanding and exploration of it, especially as he outlines it in his English PEN speech, quoted in this chapter's epigraph. Within a Caribbean literary climate in the early 1970s, Rohlehr helped to extract the term 'aesthetic' from its association with the 'good' and the 'beautiful'. He instead uses it to describe the various manifestations of artistic form that create different sensory experiences. Dub poetry was seen by Rohlehr as the timeliest example of why this alternative definition of aesthetics, emphasising sensory experience, is necessary.

According to Rohlehr, the question of taste can never be satisfactorily settled. Therefore, he sees the term aesthetic as more useful when it does not simply attempt to distinguish notions of good from bad. Rohlehr is therefore more interested in definitions of aesthetics that are tied to sensibility and perception. In the article 'West Indian Poetry: Some Problems of Assessment 1', published in the journal *Bim* in 1972, Rohlehr responds to Eric Roach's criticism in the *Trinidad Guardian* (1970) of Brathwaite's anthology of contemporary Caribbean writing in *Savacou* 3/4 (Edwards, 2011). Roach criticises the anthology for what he perceives to be the inferior quality of some of the younger West Indian poets included in the anthology, accusing the poetry of being bad, boring, and naïve (Rohlehr, 1972, 317). He also has harsh words for the poets in the anthology who 'thresh about wildly […] in the murky waters of race, oppression and dispossession […] to bury one's head in the stinking dunghills of slavery' (Rohlehr, 1972, 317). In short, Roach objects

to a perceived tendency among younger poets to engage in simple rhetorical protest, which he believes inhibits rather than liberates Caribbean poets. By contrast, Roach expresses admiration for the work of Derek Walcott and other likeminded poets. In his response to Roach's criticism, Rohlehr opines that the conflict about the anthology's quality, or lack thereof, is a result of two slightly different understandings of the term 'aesthetic'. Whereas Roach focuses on 'proper form', Rohlehr's understanding of 'aesthetic' is more pluralistic: 'The question of form and shape is a much more difficult one to settle, since there is no common consensus anywhere in the world today as to what constitutes proper form' (Rohlehr, 1972, 316). All poetry, even poetry that does not have a high status, has 'form and shape' (Rohlehr, 1972, 316). Poetry of low status, or that is deemed simply bad, should be taken seriously as an aesthetic expression nonetheless.

In the opening of the article in *Bim*, Rohlehr stresses that he appreciates a wide variety of writing. In fact, he especially welcomes 'young writers [who] are trying to shape ordinary speech, and to use some of the musical rhythms which dominate the entire Caribbean environment' (Rohlehr, 1972, 316). Rohlehr makes it clear that the introduction of these new musical and oral styles add new perspectives to the discussion about what the proper forms of Caribbean poetry might be. He writes: 'Mr Roach described his criteria for determining what was art, and what was good and bad poetry. In so doing, he has joined a sharp debate which is going on about aesthetics, tradition, literary criticism and sensibility in the West Indies' (Rohlehr, 1972, 316). Consequently, Rohlehr ties the ongoing discussion about oral poetry to a continuing debate about how the terms 'aesthetics' and 'sensibility' are used in the Caribbean. It is noticeable that Rohlehr repeats the word 'sensibility' in the article. He talks about 'the sensibility of the youth', of 'having some knowledge of the sensibility which produces reggae, and the entirely different one which shapes kaiso', as well as the languages and rhythms 'that constitute the inner ground of our sensibility' (Rohlehr,

1972, 318). This is not to say that Rohlehr is uninterested in quality or beauty. He too has these concerns, but like Brathwaite, Glissant, and the rest of CAM, he questions how and in what ways certain standardised European poetic models have determined quality and beauty in the Caribbean

One of Rohlehr's main criticisms of Roach's comments concerns the latter's dismissal of the rasta-poet Bongo Jerry, who Johnson also positions as one of his main literary role models by quoting him in the epigraph of 'If I woz a Tap-Natch Poet'. According to Rohlehr, Roach makes the mistake of associating the rhythm of the drum with something monstrous or primitive. As Roach writes of Jerry: 'Are we going to tie the drum of Africa to our nails and bay like mad dogs at the Nordic world to which our geography tie us?' (Rohlehr, 1972, 319). In response, Rohlehr accuses Roach of prioritising European culture as a route to salvation because he unquestioningly believes that 'we have been given the European languages and forms of culture – culture in the traditional aesthetic sense, meaning the best that has been thought, said and done' (Rohlehr, 1972, 318). He then proceeds to challenge Roach's understanding of European aesthetics as a homogenised concept:

> I am not quite certain, however, what is meant by 'traditional aesthetic sense'. This implies that there has always been a universal conception of good taste, or sensibility, when in fact, there is in the vast and complex tradition of Europe – not to mention other parts of the world – justification for just about every kind of writing, including the elemental naked statement of emotion which is what Mr Roach says he deprecates in young West Indian writers, and the rhetorical use of local dialects, which Mr Roach seems to view more as limitation than as possibility (Rohlehr, 1972, 319).

The fact that Rohlehr reacts to Roach's use of 'traditional aesthetic sense' is symptomatic of his attempt to shift the focus from notions of good or bad art to a more complex understanding of aesthetic plurality. Since there is no consensus about good taste, according to Rohlehr, the focus on taste can easily lead to reductive ideas, such as the unquestioning celebration of European taste. Instead of asking if a poem is good, which often demands a yes or no answer, one should rather ask: how do we experience the poem, and what are its effects? He furthermore stresses that it is inaccurate to contrast European and non-European

notions of taste. In Rohlehr's view, there is 'justification for just about every kind' of writing within a European tradition. It is therefore reductive to create the image of a European consensus and then, in turn, to use this as a springboard for criticising Caribbean nation language poetry.

Caribbean poets' appropriations of Eliot already discussed demonstrate why this is reductive. Rohlehr is also open to the growing presence of oral poetry and its techniques. For instance, he demonstrates how nation language poetry, when it first rose to prominence in Caribbean criticism, challenged conventional notions of good poetic craft, and introduced alternative criteria such as 'genuinenness of feeling' (Rohlehr, 1972, 316). Towards the end of the article, Rohlehr returns to an evaluation of Bongo Jerry's poetry, this time in positive terms: 'I believe, too, that Jerry shares [Jamaican musician Don] Drummond's sense of "dread", a brooding melancholy which seems always on the verge of explosion, but which is under some sort of formal control'(Rohlehr, 1972, 320). The article evidences Rohlehr's awareness of the fact that the new oral poetry introduced not only a novel political idiom, but also new aesthetic forms that were a result of formal awareness rather than, as Roach's comments would imply, its absence.

Roach's distinction between the achievements of Walcott and the younger 'angry' oral poets illustrates something noteworthy: that Glissant's and Brathwaite's strong disregard for the distinction between high and low culture, and my argument that Johnson's and Walcott's writings are importantly similar in approach, are in fact significant positions to take. Although many Caribbean critics have tried to challenge these distinctions, we must remember the often subtle spoken and unspoken distinctions made between, on the one hand, Nobel Prize winners such as Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul and, on the other, 'the rest' (Trilling, 2008). Even Brathwaite, whose academic reception connects him to the former group, has perhaps not had the mainstream academic attention he deserves. Such undeniable

hierarchies between and selective canonisation of Caribbean poets are crucial to recognise in order to understand the critical significance of reading Johnson, as well as Rohlehr, in relation to some of these more mainstream figures.

Continuum theory, prominent in Caribbean post-independence intellectual life, provides a useful framework for questioning these subtle hierarchies and distinctions. In his introduction to *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean,* compellingly titled 'The Shape of that Hurt', Rohlehr continues his defence of the new oral poetry forms, and uses Caribbean continuum theory in order to do so (Rohlehr, 1989, 2). Originally configured as a linguistic theory that sought to to explain the mutual relationship between creole and Standard English, it suggested that most people in the Caribbean are situated somewhere on a scale between creole and Standard English, which are not seen as essentially separate but rather as variants of the language along a linguistic spectrum (Cassidy and Le Page, 1980). The method of defining categories in the Caribbean along continua rather than in binary oppositions has been extended to a variety of fields beyond the study of linguistics. Rohlehr argues that the linguistic theory describes a process that Caribbean novelists 'already had been applying subconsciously for some time by exploring the whole range of speech registers open to them' (Rohlehr, 1985, 2). As such, Rohlehr extends this notion of a creole continuum to Caribbean literature: 'Continuum theory thus applied allows for both linguistic and aesthetic code-switching; for the dialectical collision of opposite tendencies and notions of form in the same writer or between different writers' (Rohlehr, 1985, 2). In 'The Problem of the Problem of Form: The Idea of Aesthetic Continuum and Aesthetic Code Switching in West Indian Literature' (1985), Rohlehr clarifies that the Caribbean aesthetic continuum is mainly a continuum between 'certain aspects of the aesthetics of modernism' and 'the oral traditions of the West Indies' (Rohlehr, 1985, 2). He argues that writers may position themselves on this scale on the basis of different logics,

either as representing a 'thesis' to an 'anti-thesis', or alternatively as hybrid expressions. As we saw, Brathwaite's and Johnson's appropriation of T.S. Eliot instantiates the latter phenomenon, through which modernism and oral forms become deeply intertwined.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rohlehr argues that most Caribbean writers are hybrids who exist somewhere along the continuum, and few fall into the extreme counterpoints. However, particularly relevant to Johnson's work is the way in which Rohlehr ties different writers' positions on this continuum to their geographic location:

> The evidence of our writing suggests that we live in late twentieth century societies in which there are memories of villages but the cities determine the dynamics of change. There is a groping for the pastoral even in writers who criticize other aspects of such yearning when they see them revealed in the work of their fellow writers. There is, conversely, a preoccupation with the worst effects of urbanism: nightmare slums, ecological atrocity, violence, madness, despair, and dislocation. Our peoples and our sensibilities have been shaped by both experiences, and we have added to village and town, suburb and metropol (Rohlehr, 1985, 2).

The Caribbean aesthetic continuum is thus, according to Rohlehr, based on an environmental continuum between the rural and the urban. Rohlehr argues that 'our peoples and our sensibilities' have been shaped by both the urban and rural environment. At the same time, the rural is inherently linked to the oral and folk traditions, while the urban 'nightmare slums' are tied to a modernist aesthetic of alienation. As I argue throughout, Johnson helps to integrate the Black British experience and London into Caribbean oral poetry in the late 1970s. In this way, Johnson is a hybrid writer not only because he writes at the intersection between Black British and Caribbean poetry. Instead, Johnson is a *typical* hybrid, or 'continuum writer', because he adds an urban sensibility of alienation – of which 'Inglan is a Bitch' is the prime example – to the tropical imagery and oral paradigms of Caribbean poetry. He balances folk culture (Nation language and reggae) with the experience of urban alienation associated with the big city: 'wen mi jus come to Landan toun/ mi use to work pan di andahgroun' (Johnson, 2006, 39). It is striking how Rohlehr, like Brathwaite, Glissant, and Walcott, forges a direct link between particular sensory environments and styles of writing. Writing is shaped, in Rohlehr's view, by our perceptual models and experiences of 'village,

or town, suburb and metropole'. Again, we see that Brathwaite's concept of perceptual models, even though it is not explicitly used here, is crucial to our understanding of some of the arguments and interests that connect these Caribbean writers to one another, as well as their impact on Johnson.

It is exactly because he attempts to see similarities between Caribbean writers where others mainly see differences that Rohlehr makes an immense contribution to discussions about Caribbean aesthetics and our comprehension of dub poetry within it:

> My basic assumption is that any people would have an aesthetic, a style, a way of doing things and the Caribbean people, like any other people, would have some way of dong things that is characteristically Caribbean. The way to determine what this aesthetic might be is to look at what Caribbean people have done and to create, through a close dialogue with the material, some way of talking about their achievement and of distinguishing what is peculiarly Caribbean about it, if you employ that method, beginning with the work – Walcott's poetry, Sparrow's calypsos, Selvon's novels – you might then be able to recognise recurring features (Rohlehr in Regis, 2013, 2).

As this chapter has been arguing, Rohlehr contends that the usefulness and critical potential of a term like 'Caribbean aesthetics' only becomes fully realised when we compare material that spans across many genres and styles. It is not, therefore, a coincidence that Rohlehr is one of the few critics that Johnson cites in his own critical writing. Rohlehr established a discourse in which dub poetry and reggae were seen as a continuation, not a break, from discussions about the post-war Caribbean literary canon. Johnson's poetry, I argue, should be seen as a natural extension of and supplement to the work of critics like Brathwaite, both of whom share a recognisable interest in oral forms. Yet, Johnson's aesthetic-political project is also related to the critical efforts of people like Walcott and Glissant, who are less commonly acknowledged but equally important links.

In this chapter, I have shown that emphasising the relationship between what Brathwaite calls perceptual models (templates taken from aesthetic experiences in general of one's environment and everyday life) and writing is a central and unifying tendency in how a wide gamut of Caribbean critics and poets have talked about a Caribbean aesthetic. In the writing of Brathwaite, Glissant, Rohlehr and also CAM, aesthetics is defined as 'sensory

perception', rather than beauty. For these critics, poetry is always shaped by perceptual models, and can in turn create and shape them. Put simply, poetry is always an expression of how we perceive and sense the world, and is invested with the power to change those perceptions – this is where its potential to make political interventions lies. Conversely, the exclusion or denial of Caribbean perceptual models from poetry is the exclusion of Caribbean people's existence, subjectivity, and humanity. It is a 'tyranny' of one form of existence over another, as Brathwaite points out (Brathwaite, 1984, 32). For these Caribbean critics, the political and radical act of writing resides in giving voice to one's own authentic experiences and in writing poetry that is rooted in one's own *true* perception. For the Caribbean poet, this means finding Caribbean styles of writing, while being ready to adjust these to other locations and environments. This criterion of individual truthfulness, along with the emphasis on stylistic traditions, promotes taking inspiration from and creatively interacting with the ideas of others, and juxtaposing high and low culture, without erasing one's own senses and experiences – even when these challenge our expectations of what the Caribbean is and should be. It is often when poetry manages to reflect its Caribbean origins, while also introducing unexpected and foreign elements, that it represents a Caribbean aesthetic as both a style and method. As I will explain in more detail in the following chapter, Johnson's work exemplifies this argument.

To conclude, Johnson's response to the Caribbean and modernist canon brings attention to his appropriation of pre-existing ideas and application of them to his own cultural context. He creates new poetry from old elements, but his method situates him in an ongoing Caribbean tradition. Johnson's relationship with the literary canon furthermore recalls the core artistic strategy of dub production: to make a new version out of old material, adding and omitting certain elements. Johnson describes this process in the following terms: 'You have a

piece of music and you take away the different elements and you're left with the drum and the bass. And then you bring in guitar, you bring in keyboard, you bring in piano, whatever'.[72]

Johnson's fascination with the echo, a common feature of dub music, in 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' illuminates the complexity of poetry and of voice. In one way, poetry is itself an echo of the world if one views poetry as mimesis. The echo frees the voice from the body and makes it a free-floating material. The echo is, however, indexical in the sense that its existence always refers to something that exists prior to it.[73] Correspondingly, the title plays on the coexistence of the living and the dead, the past and the present, with the echo making the past present again, mediating the two, and offering a different temporal understanding where the past can be present. Here, Johnson echoes, or 'dubs', both Eliot and Brathwaite. One could argue that 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' is a play about forefathers and how the brutal past of slavery is experienced simultaneously as something past and present: 'Your bones will be our fortress' and 'All rebel flesh is one flesh' (Johnson, 1988, 31). These lines show a continuity between the struggles of the past and the struggles of the present. We can also view it as Johnson's commentary on the relationship between tradition and 'his individual talent', or what Walcott calls 'the individual dialect', where Johnson understands himself as a living poet who channels and 'echoes' voices of the past. I have tried to show how Brathwaite and CAM are some of these central voices, and how we can also hear the subtle reverb of the work of Walcott, Glissant, and Rohlehr in Johnson's work, as he participates in a Caribbean aesthetic. As we will see in the following chapter, which will discuss Johnson's relationship with punk and other subcultures with which he

[72] Online source: http://www.classical-reggae-interviews.org/lkj-dub.htm [24.05/20.13].

[73] Walcott ties the echo to the fragmented memory that defines Caribbean literature: 'And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its "making" but its remaking, the fragmented memory, the armature that frames the god, even the rite that surrenders it to a final pyre; the god assembled cane by cane, reed by weaving reed, line by plaited line, as the artisans of Felicity would erect his holy echo' (Walcott, 1992).

came into contact in Britain, Johnson's dub version of a Caribbean aesthetic not only remixes old paradigms, but also adds, enhances, and foregrounds new elements.

2. The Black New Wave: Re-reading Johnson's Poetry in its British Contexts

young blood
yout rebels:
new shapes
shapin
new patterns
creatin new links
linkin
blood risin surely
carvin a new path
movin fahwod to freedom
(Johnson, 2006, 22)

New wave, new rave
New wave, new wave, new rave
Wailers be there
The Damned, The Jam, The Clash
Maytals will be there
Doctor Feelgood too, ooh,
No boring old farts
No boring old farts
No boring old farts
Will be there
('Punky Reggae Party', Bob Marley, 1977)

The previous chapter demonstrates how Linton Kwesi Johnson at once revives and readdresses the Caribbean literary traditions preoccupation with defining a Caribbean aesthetic. He responds to a range of perspectives on Caribbean perceptual models as configured in the writing of Caribbean literary figures, most notably Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant and Gordon Rohlehr (Brathwaite, 1984; Glissant, 1997; Walcott, 1998; Rohlehr, 1985). Although Johnson extends and develops these self-conscious attempts to define a Caribbean aesthetic, he also transforms them by adapting them to a British context, as this chapter explore in more detail. Broadly speaking, Johnson accommodates growing British subcultural interests and related urban sentiments previously absent from both nation language poetry *and* original forms of Jamaican reggae. The thesis of this chapter is that Johnson's work, though rarely considered outside of Caribbean or Black British cultural contexts, is in fact shaped in significant ways by his interaction with the punk and new wave movement. This movement was becoming increasingly popular in the period in which Johnson published his two definitive works, *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975) and *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980). What is important to remember, however, is that Johnson's

emphasis on representing his own voice and location as a Black British voice is, somewhat counterintuitively, in fact symptomatic of his engagement with the Caribbean canon, through its emphasis both on authentic perceptual models and the acceptance of creolized forms.

Bob Marley made his own affiliation with the punk movement known when, in 1977, he recorded and released 'Punky Reggae Party', a flipside of the single release of his now more widely known track 'Jamming'.[74] In the song, he acknowledges and applauds the fact that British punk bands such as The Clash, The Damned, and The Jam had started covering reggae songs and promoting Jamaican music to their audiences in the UK. The recording is demonstrative of the broader alliance between punk and reggae music, and which this chapter investigates through Johnson's work. However, the multi-racial dimensions of reggae culture in Britain, which, as the example of Marley shows, were widely recognised and celebrated in the late 1970s, have largely been forgotten by contemporary accounts of, and commentaries on, dub poetry. Yet, this collaboration between reggae and punk shaped his poetry in noticeable and formative ways. Furthermore, these relations moulded not only his personal and musical networks, but also his political and literary ones, and it is these interactions that will be the focus of this chapter.

In what follows, I explore the reggae-punk context through which we can examine Johnson's work. My tracing of the impact of this relationship on Johnson's poetry and persona will mainly be grounded in an analysis of archival material from the alternative British music press of the late 1970s and early '80s, including publications such as *NME*, *Melody Maker*, *Sounds, ZigZag,* and *Black Music and Jazz Review* (articles, interviews), alongside close readings of his poems.[75] The focus on punk is particularly important as it

[74] Double A-side single on Island records, 1977 (WIP 6410 AA). Co-written by Marley and Lee Perry. It was recorded in London and produced by Perry, and was also released as a 12- inch.
[75] The chapter's argument is built on extensive research into Johnson's and British reggae's press coverage by influential British music journalists in the 1970s and 1980s. These sources are not collected in a single database or archive. Therefore, I have proceeded by gathering various articles found on blogs and websites, in addition to collections of music magazines such as *Black Music and Jazz Review* from private owners acquired via EBay.

shifts the focus to the more local and specifically *British* aspects of Johnson's writing. A comparative study of Johnson and the punk movement is, however, not only warranted because of the thematic similarities, or because it generates a richer and fuller understanding of his work. Crucially, such a reading gestures towards the many moments, histories, tropes, and figures that we risk erasing or overlooking when we divide post-war and 21st-century British poetry and lyricism neatly into a white tradition on the one hand, and a black tradition on the other. It is this aesthetic 'apartheid' that this chapter's comparative and intertextual reading attempts to dismantle.

As we have already seen, Johnson is well respected as a black radical poet, a social commentator, and an anti-racist activist. He is well-known for his disillusionment with, and anger at, the policies of Margaret Thatcher's governments, and for being a vocal critic of the treatment of black people in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. This image suggests that Johnson has, perhaps willfully, taken on what Kobena Mercer calls the black artist's 'burden of representation' by often attempting to speak on behalf of his community (Mercer, 1990). Alison Donnell's description of Johnson as one of the best-known 'black 'polemical artist/activists' (Donnell, 2001, 180) is representative. Other commentators on Johnson's work such as Neil Corcoran and Christian Habekost also place his work in this context of confrontational and radical black politics (Corcoran, 2007; Habekost, 1993; Hamilton, 1996; Merriman, 2012*)*. Donnell's choice of the word 'polemical' to characterise Johnson's work illuminates why few literary critics have looked into Johnson's interaction with the punk movement. The word 'polemical' implies that Johnson is writing in *opposition* to something. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, we need a more precise and nuanced understanding of the forces that Johnson was trying to oppose. There appears to be a prevailing assumption that Johnson not only writes in opposition to the English canon, as he himself has stated on

several occasions (Markham, 1989), but that he also writes in opposition to white cultural hegemony more generally.

As indicated in the introduction, Shalini Puri argues that Caribbean literary criticism tends to focus on revolutionary political messages, and often overlooks ideas that are not directly subversive. She contends that Johnson and Michael Smith are among the several dub poets critically read only in order to ‘uncover or recover a revolutionary or militant popular culture’ (Puri, 2003, 33). Johnson has in many ways been stereotyped as an ‘angry’ black poet, though his involvement with punk and new wave movements, and his large white audience, complicates this understanding of black militancy. Indeed, Johnson’s punk reception and friendships with punk performers complicates the polemical energy in his work, and highlights that he is not only addressing issues of race, but also responding to broader issues of class, youth culture, and unemployment that were cut across white and Black British culture at this time. Through *re-readings* of his poems, the chapter shows that many of the issues engaged with by Johnson are also addressed in punk and new wave lyrics from the 1970s and ’80s. In this way, the chapter demonstrates that Johnson must, in addition to being considered a black radical and Caribbean poet, be understood as a ‘black new wave’ poet, and a product of the multicultural British cultural landscape in which he was writing.

The overwhelming focus on black cultural frameworks in Johnson’s reception is not, perhaps, unexpected if we consider his personal background, his participation in activist groups, and his emphasis on black autonomous organizations such as the Black Panthers, Creation for Liberation, and Race Today. Consequently, Johnson is often pinned down to this statement: ‘My very choice of language was political. I saw poetry as a weapon in our struggle for black liberation’ (Merriman, 2012, 219). This overt politicisation has stifled ambiguity in readings of his artistic and political project. Still, this overwhelming emphasis on black radicalism only accounts for some aspects of his reception. The one-sided focus on

the black radical context of his work limits our ability to recognise the subtler stylistic shifts that he makes when we compare him to his Caribbean predecessors. A closer look at his poetry reveals that he makes certain aesthetic choices which mark out his poetry as specifically Black *British* – with particular emphasis on that second word – and which distinguish his work from the paradigms of Caribbean poetry at the time. This chapter shows that his interactions with punk and new wave movements were crucial in constituting this shift to a more amalgamated black and British formal expression in oral poetry.

2.1 'Wen Me Jus Come to Landan Toun': The British Turn

Johnson has said that his motivation for starting his own record label, LKJ Records, was precisely to develop a distinctively British sound: 'to make a firm contribution to the reggae tradition here in Britain, while at the same time transcending the limits of the Jamaican sound' (May, 1980, 16). This section takes remarks such as these into consideration in order to introduce some of the most immediate and striking formal and thematic features of his work, which are distinctively British. These characteristics prompt us to read Johnson's poetry in relation to British reggae's development into a relatively autonomous form that became independent from Jamaican reggae.

The Jamaican roots reggae of the late 1970s could be very vehement, even militant, but this vehemence was often couched in a spiritual, elliptical, and metaphorical language, as was the case with vocal groups and bands such as The Congos, The Upsetters, The Gladiators, The Abyssinians, and for singers and deejays such as Horace Andy, Burning Spear, Big Youth and Tappa Zukie. For example, though Burning Spear might sing the refrain 'Do you remember the days of slavery? Do you remember the days of slavery? Do you remember the days of slavery?',[76] this expression of political consciousness remained

[76] Burning Spear, 'Slavery Days' (1976). Transcription.

elegiac and focused on the past. Whilst it lamented slavery as an almost mythical (though still historical) and spiritually significant trauma of black collective memory, and related this indirectly to social difficulties in the present, it did not call out enemies or challenge the political 'now' in any detailed or concrete manner. By contrast, there is something very direct, prosaic, and blunt about Johnson's most popular poem, 'Inglan is a Bitch' (1980). It has more in common rhetorically with the lyrics and energy of British punk and new wave music that was emerging around the same time as Johnson's poetry was gaining in popularity in the 1970s:

> 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 not escapin it
> Inglan is a bitch
> dere's no runin whe fram it
> (Johnson, 2006, 39).

'Inglan is a Bitch' radically positions England, and Britain more generally, at the centre of Johnson's new Black British Caribbean aesthetic. The poem is symptomatic of the historical moment, when British reggae was gaining more credibility and attention as a form distinct from its Jamaican roots. The most notable British reggae bands, such as Aswad and Steel Pulse, consisted of members who were second-generation Caribbean immigrants born in the UK (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 330–343). [77] The rise of British reggae in the late 1970s and 1980s represented the cultural formation of a second-generation black identity that we also see exemplified in Johnson's aesthetic and rhetorical choices during this period.

[77] The film *Babylon* from 1980, written by Martin Stellman (writer of Quadrophenia) and Franco Rosso, portrays how British reggae became a culture of its own. British reggae was referred to using the broad national term, although Johnson in his poetry talks about 'Inglan'. The great majority of British reggae artists were English, though they preferred the term British when referring to themselves. 'British' was not such a racially coded term as 'English' was and remains (Baucom, 1999). Both terms will be used throughout, as appropriate to context.

Before elaborating on the poetic similarities between Johnson's poetry and punk later in the chapter, I will begin with an opening reading of 'Inglan is a Bitch' to introduce some of the ways in which Johnson's poetry represents what we may call a 'British turn' in Caribbean oral poetry. The poem's opening introduction of the Underground in the second line situates the poem firmly in London's urban landscape, rather than the beaches and tropical landscapes that inform the imagery of much Caribbean poetry (DeLoughrey et al., 2005; Dash, 1998). Nonetheless, the spelling 'Inglan' underlines that the speaker perceives England from the located perspective of the Jamaican immigrant. Moreover, the phonetic spelling of I-n-g-l-a-n captures, in one word, both explicitly and implicitly, Johnson's continuation of conventions of oral poetry by writing in Jamaican patois or 'national language' (Brathwaite, 1984), even as it shifts the scene and the focus to an English environment. 'Inglan' clearly denotes England, but the sound of the 'iiing' and the swallowed 'd' also implies an England that is chewed up and spat out of the Jamaican throat, an image that enacts the poem's process of appropriation.[78] In the poem, Johnson's Britishness is established though his depiction of London, but it is also a sound – two syllables – as well as a voice he consciously performs. Johnson's Britishness is thus both a self-evident fact (he grew up in Britain, the poems are set in Britain), and something that is more subtly hinted at through his aesthetic choices, most evidently here in the form of the phonetic spelling of 'I' and, again, the loss of the 'd' sound after the nasal 'n'.[79]

It is vital to acknowledge that Johnson formed part of a tradition and was certainly not the first to articulate the Caribbean immigrant experience in Britain. Writing about a British environment from a Caribbean and black perspective can be dated back to the work of

[78] For more on how London Jamaican differs from Jamaican in Jamaica see Mark Sebba's *London Jamaican: Language Systems in Interaction* (Sebba, 1993).
[79] The phonetic deconstruction of England is perhaps more potent than that of Britain, as the 'English' have historically been more closely associated with whiteness, while 'the British' has been a legal term 'which permitted the empire to be simultaneously *within* the boundaries of Britishness, and *outsid*e the territory of Englishness […]' (Baucom, 1999, 10).

Samuel Selvon and George Lamming in the 1950s and 1960s, whose novels *The Lonely Londoners* and *The Emigrants* detailed the experiences of Caribbean immigrants in London. It is therefore, I suggest, not primarily his depiction of an urban London environment that constitutes Johnson's radical 'British turn' in Caribbean poetry. Less apparent, though more vital, is his use of confrontational language and his adaptation of a 1970s subcultural aesthetic that marks out his radical shift towards what is best described as a multicultural British expression. Interestingly, then, the focus on 'Inglan' does not simply refer to the speaker's geographical location or thematic concerns. As mentioned earlier, 'Inglan' and Englishness are also performed in less obvious ways, reinforced here in his striking use of the offensive term *bitch*. The aggressive directness of 'bitch' sets Johnson apart from his Caribbean contemporaries.[80] This rudeness would have had a calculated shock effect on Johnson's early listeners and readers that parallels the effects of the offensiveness of punk and the 'slackness' of reggae (and later dancehall), which in turn anticipate the 'Parental Advisory Explicit Content' of rap. All of these expressions, however diverse, indicate a self-consciously urban and confrontational aesthetic. They all connect notions of urban experience to rhetorical hardness and toughness – a language of 'the streets'. A similar language marks early punk songs like the Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK': 'Cause I/ wanna be/ Anarchy/ In the City',[81] and God Save the Queen: 'God save the queen/ she ain't no human being'.[82] These songs, which the BBC refused to play, combine bleak representations of British cities with hard-hitting rhetoric that we find replicated in 'Inglan is a Bitch'.

Johnson`s confrontational tone and urban focus prompts us to see him in relation to these subcultural and youth-cultural networks, and particularly to the emergence of the punk and new wave movements. Of particular concern here is the first wave of British punk, which

[80] The misogynistic undertones of this language are discussed later in a section on Johnson's and punk performers' criticism of Thatcher.
[81] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sexpistols/anarchyintheuk.html [08.05.17, 23.46].
[82] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sexpistols/godsavethequeen.html [08.05.17, 23.49].

emerged around 1976–77 and dramatically raised the threshold for what was considered radical, provocative, and obscene in the British public sphere at that time. The most notorious example of this confrontational behavior is The Sex Pistols' appearance on the Bill Grundy show on 1st December 1976, aired at the pre-watershed time of 6pm. Members of the group felt that Grundy was being condescending, and decided to call him a 'dirty fucker' in reaction, as well as using other obscenities. The incident received tabloid coverage and has become a classic punk interview. As I will discuss in more detail in the second half of this chapter, punk shared a strong anti-establishment ethos with reggae and this brought them into conjunction in the public sphere, resulting in an exchange of influences and energies.

The provocative air of reggae artists is comparable to the image of music writers and artists coming from the punk world, and it may be that Johnson's rude boy demeanor supplemented the punk and new wave movement's emphasis on rudeness and rebellious behavior. These self-consciously 'in your face' features of the punk movement are echoed in the insulting message and unpolished effects of the scribbled, crooked, and handwritten graffiti-style font on the cover of the first edition of 'Inglan is Bitch' (Race Today Publications, 1980). These links, as I show in my readings of the poems, are indispensable to our understanding of Johnson as shaped by punk cultural style, just as he shaped it in turn. Designed by Fay Chang, the cover brought in a strong DIY-quality that had a lot in common with contemporaneous punk fanzine-aesthetics, especially its cut-and-paste collage qualities (figure 1).[83] The bright-red font against the grey brick wall in the background makes for a striking colour combination in which the red is emphasised, and also has something in common with the anti-aesthetic colour crash of punk cover art. We might consider, for example, Jamie Reid's use of pink and yellow on the cover of The Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks*; the bright-red font against a black and white photograph on the cover of The

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83 For photgraphic documentation of graffiti in London in the 1970s, see Roger Perry's *The Writing On The Wall* (Perry, 2014).

Stranglers' *Grip London Lady*; or Big Audio Dynamite's *The Bottom Line* (figure 2). We might then compare these punk features to some of the emblematic tropical tropes and colourful landscape imagery of Caribbean poetry covers, such as Derek Walcott's *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979), which features deep ocean-green and blue hues and a picture of a human-like creature diving into the sea, or *The Fortune Traveller* (1981) which bears a tropical bird on the cover. But these landscapes are departed from in Johnson's cover by the underlying grey brick wall. It is a dramatic urban break from these widely used vibrant and sun-drenched visuals in the publishing and marketing of Caribbean poetry.

This is a vivid example that encapsulates one of my central arguments: the Caribbean characteristics of Johnson's nation language poems were amalgamated with an English punk and new wave aesthetic to form some of the unique characteristics of Johnson's specifically British dub poetry. It also reinforces the point made in the previous chapter that Johnson is a Caribbean poet in the true sense of the word; that is, in the sense of being at once local and yet transnational and adaptable. He uses Caribbean modes such as national language, while rejecting certain Caribbean tropes and introducing new British influences. Johnson is not a Caribbean poet simply because he uses nation language. We have to remember that Brathwaite argues that Caribbean alternative forms are not only defined by the use of nation language, but simultaneously through their 'resistant' rhythm, environment, and conversational modes. As T.S. Eliot also stresses, the music of poetry: 'must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place'* (Eliot, 1975, 112). Johnson's position as a Caribbean poet is paradoxically a result of his willingness to speak from his specific location – not Jamaica, but London.

I will first demonstrate how influential music magazines in the late 1970s and '80s, such as *NME*, *Black Music and Jazz Review, ZigZag*, *Sounds,* and *Melody Maker,* documented, as well as facilitated, the development of a British discourse in which reggae

music was seen as an integral part of British popular culture, and in which Linton Kwesi Johnson was viewed in close relation to the punk movement, as it was embodied in particular in the work of John Cooper Clarke. I will refer to the music press throughout the chapter, a well as introducing some of the key articles, such as Vivien Goldman's 'Jah Punk: The Black New Wave' (1977), in this opening discussion about the music magazine archive. In the chapter's second part, I will read a selection of Johnson's poetry to demonstrate how an awareness of this interaction allows us to recognise and identify some specifically Black British aspects of his writing that have typically been overlooked. These include his multicultural reshaping of British social realism in pop lyricism; his DIY (Do It Yourself) poetics;[84] and his 'hard', violent anti-fascist rhetoric. In the third and final part, I will elaborate on his subcultural and music magazine reception history, and discuss how it offers further insight into the construction of Johnson's image and public *persona* as both a 'hipster' and a young trend-aware black radical. This final part therefore explores Johnson's punk and new wave reception, especially in the alternative music press, as not only providing insight into Johnson's relationship with punk, but also with other related and affiliated music subcultures and countercultures in Britain at the time, such as beat poetry and rude boy style. This demonstrates how the British Reggae and punk reception, also helps us to create a fuller map of Johnson's complex web of references to various, both British and non-British, musical, literary, and fashion and style-based subcultures.

2.2 Johnson's Scopic Exchange with Punk: The Music Press

Comparing the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson to punk is far from speculative, even though it does set up an uncommon conceptual framework. To ground the argument, my readings acknowledge the work's historical context through reference to archival materials. Johnson's

[84] Johnson does not use the neologism 'DIY Poetics' – that is a word I coin in this chapter. Still, he does refer to being inspired by the independent mentality of the new wave movement (May, 1981, 16).

radical poetry in late 1970s and early '80s about the black experience in Britain undoubtedly had a large white subcultural audience. This reception becomes particularly prominent when we look at Johnson's coverage by the music press, a central part of this subculture, and the arenas in which he would perform. From an interview with Johnson in the *Black Music and Jazz Review* we find there was a consensus at the time between the music press (here represented by the journalist Chris May),[85] and Johnson himself, that the album *Dread Beat an' Blood* had sold predominantly to a white audience:

> BM: How important to your political work are your albums? From what I understand *Dread Beat an' Blood* sold mainly to whites.
> LKJ: This new album, more blacks will buy it, cos more blacks will have known about it. You see, blacks are always reluctant to check for anything new, because … poetry with music is not exactly being done by *everybody* else, so it takes a bit of time for people to catch on (May, 1979, 46, emphasis in text).

Interviews such as this, which openly spell out the reception history, show the urgency of considering Johnson's subcultural audience when studying his *oeuvre*. Interacting with urban 'white' alternative youth cultures at the time was a crucial strategy in adapting the poetry to a creolized and multicultural British scene, rather than simply copying or preserving an original Jamaican style.

Punk's affiliation with reggae music is widely recognised in most defining studies of British punk music (Savage, 1991; Reynolds, 2005; Hebdige, 1979; Heylin, 2008). Still, there has been little focus on whether or how this interaction has influenced British reggae music and dub poetry. Most commonly, the relationship is represented as an asymmetrical one. However, I contend that Johnson's poetry partook in an *exchange* with punk, and should be explored through the now mostly forgotten term 'black new wave'. The term was first introduced in an article in the magazine *Sounds* in 1977 (32) entitled 'Jah Punk – the Black New Wave', written by a leading punk and reggae journalist of the time, Vivien Goldman.[86] I

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[85] Chris May is a British music journalist who was editor of *Black Music and Jazz Review.*
[86] Vivien Goldman (b. 1954): British music journalist who wrote for *NME*, *Sounds*, and *Melody Maker*. She is currently adjunct professor of punk and reggae at New York University (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivien_Goldman [07.01.17, 15.26].

adapt Goldman's term 'black new wave' to suggest that Johnson fuses Caribbean and black poetic influences with British popular music and trends of the 1970s and 1980s to produce a particular Black British reggae aesthetic that is marked by influences both British and Caribbean, white and black.[87]

By creating the hybrid terms 'Jah punk' and 'black new wave', Goldman asserts that punk was shaping British reggae at the same time as British reggae was moulding understandings of what the term 'punk' could signify. From the perspective of the 1970s, Goldman constructs a mutual and symmetrical relationship between the two movements, an assessment now rarely articulated, though it might be symptomatic of a more optimistic view of cultural appropriation than is the case in the 21st-century.[88] The commentaries and criticism that constituted the free-ranging music journalism widely practiced at the time, but that was yet to be formally adapted into and acknowledged by a school of musical critique, offers the contemporary reader some refreshing perspectives. The writing is often unfettered by the ideological and critical consensus that sometimes governs a negative analysis of cultural appropriation, as we for example see in the more recent work of Paul Gilroy (Gilroy, 2010).

Goldman's feature introduces a selection of new British reggae bands such as Aswad, Black Slate, Matumbi, Cimarons, and Steel Pulse, and presents them in relation to the emergence of the punk movement. Here Goldman, speaking in 1977, describes how reggae had crossed over to a punk audience in that very year:

> reggae music, formerly a mysterious underworld/secret society, to the honky British majority, has emerged from the strictly West Indian cloister into the comparatively neon glare of the young local hostelry or punk

[87] As will be evident throughout, I use the terms 'punk' and 'new wave' interchangeably, as is typical of music magazines and interviews of the late 1970s and early '80s. However, 'new wave' will also sometimes describe, in accordance with Malcom McLaren's definition, bands that are related to punk, but that do not qualify as punk in a narrow or rigid formal sense (Heylin, 2008, 140). The term 'black new wave' then permits us to see British reggae bands that occupied the same musical scene as punk as a part of a broader and expanded new-wave spectrum.

[88] For more on the problems of appropriation in the context of black music, see Paul Gilroy's *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Gilroy, 2010).

hangout […] the folks with the extremely short hair have had a good deal of influence in encouraging the folks with extremely long hair out of their regular venues (Goldman, Sounds, 1977, 32).

Goldman refers to the 'short haired' punks who were becoming a new audience for the 'long haired' dreadlock-rastas. Most saliently, she also suggests that these British reggae bands had a punk dimension to their expression: 'Some of the bands however, fulfill all the classic punk/new wave qualifications – they're political, they're angry, and they're young. And you can dance to them' (Goldman, 1977, 32). These two unconventional terms, 'black new wave' and 'jah punk', though never becoming part of the dominant critical vocabulary, provide a useful language with which to describe the new forms that grew out of these British multiracial alliances and networks.

In the influential book about postpunk, *Rip It up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (2008), Simon Reynolds dedicates a whole chapter to the interaction between reggae and postpunk called 'Tribal Revival: The Pop Group and The Slits', which focuses on how postpunk bands appropriated reggae music. Entitling this chapter 'Tribal Revival', Reynolds implies that these artists' interest in reggae was a form of 'primitivism': 'The Slits shared the The Pop Group's naïve idealization of noble savagery and pure instinct, a cult of innocence and intuition that sometimes take on an anti-intellectual tinge' (Reynolds, 2005, 84). The controversial connotations of using notions of 'pure instinct' in analyses of black music aside, Reynolds' 'primitivist' interpretation further denies British reggae artists like Dennis Bovell, who produced both The Slits and Linton Kwesi Johnson, any agency in conceptualising or narrating the crossover phenomena. The focus is restricted to the white musicians' gaze on, or their listening closely to, black music.

Édouard Glissant's notion of scopic exchange may help us question this asymmetric reading; 'the colonial subject's desire is not to escape the master's gaze, but to participate in the scopic exhange on equal terms […] "We hate ethnography…the distrust we feel toward it is not caused by our displeasure at being looked at, but rather by our obscure resentment at

not having our turn at seeing"' (Britton, 1999, 23). For Glissant, scopic exchange means that the coloniser and the colonised subject are shaped by each other at the level of perception; it's a two-way exchange rather than a case of ethnography where the colonised only function as an object. Glissant emphasises the colonial subject's demand to also perceive 'the other', rejecting the status of observed to become themselves the observer. Secondly, his notion of scopic exchange reveals the importance of aesthetics by using visual, or perceptual and sensory metaphors, to make vivid the mechanisms of cultural exchange. When he pictures cultural exchange as a scopic exchange, he shows how equality is linked to the senses and to perception, and more specifically to the forms that are or are not available to perception.

Through my readings of Johnson, I demonstrate that he participated in a scopic exchange with punk that manifests in both the construction of his poetry and persona. Whether we can postulate the intentionally composite and amalgamated nature of these constructions therefore depends on whether we believe that Johnson could perceive what his exchange with the punks involved, or whether we think he remained blind, visionless or senseless in these encounters. The latter understanding is difficult to justify without simultaneously dehumanising the author, stripping him not only of agency, but also of receptivity, two concepts that are closely interrelated in Glissant's notion of equality. Reynolds might be partly correct to argue that punks were fascinated by the 'primitive' and 'exotic' reggae musicians, but we might also want to consider the possibility that reggae musicians were fascinated by the exotic and 'primitive' 'freaks' that punks presented themselves as. We should be open to the possibility that the punk 'primitive' and 'back to basics' approach was equally fascinating to reggae artists like Linton Kwesi Johnson, who perceives reggae as a complex – and in the case of dub, highly technological and not as a primitive art form (Veal, 2007).

2.2.1 British Reggae Coming into its Own

Johnson's engagement with reggae music looks in two directions. In the first case, he looks *back* to the Jamaican origins of reggae by arguing for the poetic qualities of reggae deejays: 'dig doun to the root of the pain' (Johnson, 2006, 17). In the second, he looks *forward* towards reggae's future in Britain and helps to mould dub poetry to represent the Black British experience: 'slow drop. make stop. move forward' (Johnson, 2006,17). This chapter considers this latter attempt to look and move 'forward' towards the future manifestations and mutations of Caribbean culture in Britain. As highlighted in the first chapter, Caribbean poets and literary critics have been determined to find a language and a poetic form that reflects the Caribbean experience, particularly to create perceptual models that reflect the 'environmental experience' of the Caribbean. Yet, here we see how Johnson's related awareness of the necessity of creating perceptual models rooted in one's own time and place, that is, perceptual models reflecting life in a creolized 'Inglan' – made him a vital figure in the genesis of British reggae.

The term 'British reggae' has two slightly different meanings that often overlap. For the most part, I use it to signify reggae that was created in Britain by artists that identified as Black British, such as Aswad and Steel Pulse. However, occasionally 'British reggae' will in my usage also refer to 'reggae in Britain', and to Jamaican reggae's reception and history as something that shaped distinctively British cultural phenomena such as skinhead, 2-tone, or punk/new wave. Therefore, though I mostly rely on the first meaning, this second implication highlights an important nuance of the term that will also be relevant at times.

Black British roots reggae bands like Matumbi, Steele Pulse, and Aswad released important reggae albums in the 1970s. Some of these albums could, according to Lloyd Bradley, compete with their Jamaican counterparts in terms of musical quality and cultural

impact (Bradley, 2001).[89] Still, Bradley claims that Britain struggled to produce its own deejays and had trouble when it came to toasting, a practice that I will define shortly. The clearest sign of this was simply that there were very few 'toasters' around, or if there were, they did not manage to make a name for themselves beyond their local sound systems.

In Jamaica, a 'deejay' is not the same as a conventional DJ (disc jockey) who selects (and mixes) music tracks. DJs (disc jockeys) are called 'selectors' in Jamaica. By contrast, a deejay sings, talks, or chants over the music (often an instrumental track). The deejay's singing, chanting, or talking is called 'toasting'. Toasting influenced the later development of rapping in hip-hop and is thus, unsurprisingly, strongly interrelated with the verbal, lyrical, and 'rhyming' dimension of reggae music (Barrow and Dalton, 1997). For Bradley, toasting in Britain in the 1970s faced similar problems to those subsequently confronted by British rap, 'which never got past the Derek B syndrome – Englishmen sounding mildly ridiculous as they strove to pretend they'd never set foot outside South Bronx'. Further he argues that 'like the music itself, toasting needed a complete refit to establish a set of British credentials and so dictate its own pace and direction' (Bradley, 2000, 436). The linguistic and lyrical aspects of British reggae music, according to Bradley, had to reinvent themselves before they could function as more than simply an awkward copy of Jamaican reggae. Even when British reggae artists knew how to reproduce the authentic Jamaican instrumental sound, it was considerably harder to deliver the lyrical content with sincerity, which often described a reality remote from everyday life in the UK. Bradley maintains that the lyrical content of British reggae did not find its own expression until the 1980s, when Johnson's dub poetry entered onto the scene backed by Dennis Bovell's dub rhythms (Bradley, 2001, 436). Deejaying may have been a Jamaican phenomenon, but the genre of dub poetry was, in Bradley's view, pioneered by Johnson and the British reception of Jamaican deejaying. With

[89] Lloyd Bradley (b. 1955): author of *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* and *Sounds Like London*. Journalistic contributions have been published in *NME*, *Black Music and Jazz Review, The Guardian*, and *Mojo* among other titles, and he was associate producer of the BBC2 series *Reggae: The Story of Jamaican Music*.

this in mind, it becomes even more essential to understand the 'Britishness' of Johnson's dub poetry.

Interviewing Johnson in *Sounds* in 1978, Vivien Goldman discusses the manifestation of reggae in Britain and asks why British reggae had not confronted British society properly until very recently. Johnson clarifies: 'There has been some attempt made – Delroy Washington talking about the streets of Ladbroke Grove, for example. But British reggae is just coming into its own. It couldn't happened before, but it will happen more and more now' (Goldman, 1978). Johnson is here speaking at the moment when British reggae was beginning to find new ways of representing people's experiences in Britain; indeed, as he himself was becoming an important agent in that awakening. Furthermore, his comments about Rastafarianism in the 1970s illustrate that Johnson was directing his attention towards the present state of music and politics in the UK: 'It's a mistake to fight against Rasta, but you've got to recognise it for what it is – a historical force, a phase that Jamaica is going through. For the black youth in Britain it's an alternative to the reality of British society that they don't want to face up to' (Goldman, 1978). In interviews, Johnson stresses that he is not a Rastafarian. He gives it credit for being a positive force in Jamaica, but he also dismisses it as a progressive answer to the problems of people living in Britain (Caesar, 1996).

The Rastafarian movement is a spiritual and religious counterculture that developed in the 1930s as an alternative to the official Protestant Christian Jamaican mainstream. There are no exact numbers, but self-defined Rastafarians now represent around 1–5% of the population in Jamaica (Cunningham, 2012).[90] Johnson was very firm in his belief that the problems faced by young people in Jamaica were not the same as for young people in Britain, and that they required different political solutions. It follows, then, that Black British youth similarly needed a different form of reggae that better reflected everyday life in Britain. For

[90] According to the Population and Housing Census (2011) by the Statistical Institute of Jamaica, there are 29,026 self-identified Rastafarians in Jamaica. Online Source: http://statinja.gov.jm/Census/PopCensus/Popcensus2011Index.aspx [19.05.17, 19.24].

Johnson, Jamaican culture, and its Rastafarian expressions in particular, could be escapist, symptoms of not wanting to 'face up to' a British reality. In an interview in *Zig Zag* (July 1981) he goes as far as describing this as the 'rasta trap':[91]

> I think there's been some healthy developments, and some negative ones. I think that the fact that a lot of young people making music in Britain come to music via Rasta, or come to Rasta via reggae, and they naturally assume that in order to play and to sing reggae music they have to wear their hair in dreadlocks and talk about Selassie and Africa and all this business…and I don't think that is the case. It is one thing to be proud of your history and your culture, your roots and all that, but it's another thing to develop a kind of music which is true to your experience. I think some progress has been made in that direction by Aswad and Steel Pulse, but I don't think they have been able to extricate themselves from what I call the Rasta trap. Bob Marley was a Rastafarian, one of the main exponents of the field within the reggae culture, and he didn't fall in that trap himself. But the others have. That is one of the negative aspects. I think that what is happening with the 2-Tone thing is encouraging, even though a lot of it is hype. But I think some of what The Specials did is good, and The Beat I like very much. I think they are the most promising of that new genre. I think we have reached the stage now where reggae music is a part of British *popular* music culture (Hill, 1981, 28, emphasis in original).

When asked about his view on the development of British reggae, he claims that simply reproducing the 'authentic' tropes of Rasta is not 'true to your experience' (as Black British). Johnson squarely aims this criticism of authenticity at Aswad and Steel Pulse, who he felt had not made adequate efforts to create an autonomous form of British reggae. By contrast, he also embraced the new style 2-tone as an encouraging step in the right direction. 2-tone was a British genre that fused ska and punk/new wave, and The Beat and The Specials were both multiracial bands. In 'Oh Jah', Aswad sings: 'Jah will guide and protect I still so I can trod on/ No Jah forsake me not/ Some men and people who try to crucify/ Selassie I and them going pay the price/ ('Oh Jah', 1982).[92] The Specials, on the contrary, abandon this interest in Jah and Selassie, and embrace their position as rebellious youth who view no tradition, English or Jamaican, as invulnerable to playful experimentation: 'Ain't you heard of contraception/ Do you really a programe of sterilization/ Take control of the population boom/ It's in your living room/ keep a generation gap/ try wearing a cap' ('Too Much Too

[91] Johnson's 'rasta trap' recalls Derek Walcott's criticism of Afrocentric kitsch in *What the Twilight Say*s (Walcott, 1998, 57) Walcott questions the authenticity of expressions that aim to reproduce symbols of authentic African roots, and promotes expressions that reflect the composite, paradoxical, and creolized aspects of Caribbean identity.
[92] Online source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/oh-jah-lyrics-aswad.html [10.02.17, 19.48].

Young', 1979).[93] The Specials affirmed the 'generation gap' and youthful arrogance that distinguished them from their perhaps more serious, spiritually inclined role models. The 2-tone genre became a pop/punk/ska crossover, a genre in its own right, that did not really need to be compared to Jamaican ska or reggae because it was trying to be authentically British and multicultural, rather than authentically Jamaican.

Johnson's favourable view of the new punk-ska bands, and criticism of bands such as Aswad and Steele Pulse, reveal his inclinations towards the new creolized forms of British reggae and away from the more 'purist' forms. In addition, he believed that reggae was no longer exclusively a Jamaican phenomenon: it was becoming a part of *British popular music.* In his recent study 'Bass Culture: An Alternative Soundtrack to Britishness', Mykaell Riley in fact credits Johnson's term bass culture for conceptualising reggae's influence on the development of a multicultural British popular culture: 'In my usage the purpose of the term is to recognise the direct and indirect impact of the Jamaican community and Jamaican music on the cultural and social fabric of multicultural Britain, including a canon of globally influental music' (Riley, 2016, 102).[94] By warning against the shortcomings of directly transferring Rasta and Rasta's perceptual models to a completely different environment in Britain, Johnson believes, like Barrow and Dalton, that regardless of the struggles black people face in the UK, one cannot fool oneself into thinking that life in England is similar to that in Jamaica: 'Another reason why reggae produced in the mid-late 1970s in the UK seemed removed from the Jamaican model was the different social background: the lives of even the poorest and most discriminated against in Britain in the 1970s was not comparable with the sufferer's lot in West Kingston' (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 330). Johnson sums up this sentiment in his discussion of the type of records he wanted to release on his then

[93] Online source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/too-much-too-young-lyrics-specials.html [08.06.17, 15.18].
[94] Mykaell Riley: Founding member of British reggae band Steel Pulse, currently Head of Music Production, Music Faculty, University of Westminster.

recently founded record label LKJ records: 'I'm not saying that is all LKJ records will be dealing with protest music so to speak, but whatever it is people are saying they should be saying it based on their own experiences in the environment in which they live' (May, 1981, 16). His emphasis on writing about one's own experiences and environment once again echo the critical writings of Kamau Brathwaite.

A key argument of this chapter is that the interaction between British reggae and punk/new wave helped to shape the British reggae scene in the 1970s as something relatively autonomous from Jamaican reggae. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that reggae music more generally, including Jamaican reggae, started to incorporate elements from rock music in this period. Steve Barrow suggests in *Reggae: The Rough Guide* that bands, not singers recording with session musicians, dominated the mid to late 1970s reggae world. This had much to do with the crossover success of Bob Marley, who was selling out major rock venues:[95] 'For UK reggae bands, in turn, this meant a move from community halls and clubs in migrant areas to student union venues and support slots for rock bands at large-capacity halls' (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 330). This was a period in which new crossover arenas and audiences were in many ways changing some of the traditional or 'purist' characteristics of reggae music as a genre, not only in Britain, but also in Jamaica with the emergence of Bob Marley as an international 'rock star'. In other words, British reggae bands might have been shaped by crossover contexts, but this was also a more general characteristic of the internationalisation of reggae music during the mid to late 1970s. It is therefore not a coincidence, according to Barrow and Dalton, that the 'rock star' status of Bob Marley and the Wailers became the strongest influence on new British groups.

[95] The producer and singer (backed by studio musicians) have often played a more central role in Jamaican music than the standard band formation that is more closely associated with rock music.

Johnson's accounts of his motivations for starting his own British record label LKJ Records underscores why he needs to be understood as a part of the development of a 'reggae tradition here in Britain', and why this tradition depended on British artists like Johnson being keen not merely to copy Jamaican traits. We have seen how Caribbean poets tried to unshackle themselves from the norms imposed by the English canon. Similarly, young Black British artists of Johnson's generation had to eventually free themselves of their inherited Caribbean norms and standards. The former was more ideologically charged because it was an anti-colonial act. Brathwaite's 'writing back' was a way of fighting the legacy of colonial oppression of the African and black presence in the Caribbean. It was a way of resisting racism, imperialism, and classism. By contrast, Black British artists were not 'oppressed' by Caribbean prototypes, and their efforts at forging their own Black British mode of expression were not political acts on a structural and institutional level. However, their 'making new' and 'making own', creating forms of expression rooted in their own place and environment, did entail subtler and personal expressions of identity politics.

2.2.2 Brixton meets Salford: Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Cooper Clarke

In the light of Johnson's positive attitude to British experimentation, a friendship developed between Johnson and John Lydon (more famously known by his stage name, Johnny Rotten) from The Sex Pistols through their mutual contact with Chris Blackwell, producer and founder of Island Records. There were many other instances of such interactions: Johnson also became friendly with The Pop Group, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and he performed as Ian Dury's warm up act for six nights at the Hammersmith Odeon (Caesar, 1996, 71). A *Race Today* event in Kings Hall, Belle Vue, in Manchester on Friday 23rd February, 1979, as the event poster details, is emblematic of these close interactions between Johnson, punk and new wave artists. The event, organised by the black-led Creation for Liberation campaign,

featured Public Image Ltd, The Pop Group, Merger, Inner Circle, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and John Cooper Clarke. The line-up was thus composed of an interesting intermixture of reggae and punk artists.[96]

Throughout his career, Johnson interacted with performers who, like him, challenged the boundaries between poetry and musical subcultures.[97] Most notably, he featured centrally in the documentary about the punk poet John Cooper Clarke, *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt* (1982), made by Nick May for the Arts Council (figure 3). In the documentary, Johnson is seen on stage performing and introducing Clarke during their shared tour. This emphasis on the interaction between punk and reggae from the late 1970s and early '80s not only furthers our understanding of the musical reception of Johnson's work. The relationship between Clark and Johnson suggests also that it is crucial to understand its literary context. *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt* portrays Johnson, the dub poet, and Clarke, the punk poet, as the new face of British performance poetry in the late 1970s.[98] In one scene with the two alongside a photographer from the Melody Maker, Johnson and Clarke are framed as a dynamic duo, as allies in spirit and attitude, showing the close connections between dub poetry and punk poetry at the time. The British poet Lemn Sissay even recalls finding 'Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah bunched together in a Bloodaxe catalogue under the title "punk poets"'.[99]

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[96] Creation for Liberation's manifesto is available at the The City Lights booksellers and publishers blog. Online source: http://www.blogcitylights.com/2013/02/25/black-history-month-creation-for-liberation/ [08.05.27, 23.21].

[97] A recent example is Johnson appearing together with punk poets Attila the Stockbroker, John Cooper Clarke and Porky the Poet at a Speaking Volumes event on 18th June 2015. Online source: http://www.speaking-volumes.org.uk/events/stand-up-and-spit-the-big-one/ [08.05.27, 23.54].

[98] Johnson mentions The Liverpool Poets as a group that created a literary culture in the 1960s analogous to what he tried to promote in the '70s: 'In those days we were trying to bring poetry back to the people and a lot of it was in a political context and of political relevance, which shows that culture is not just about art but about life. There were a few poets around Roger McGough, Adrian Henri and those guys' (Reid, 2010).

[99] Sissay retells this anecdote in an article about his publication history on his website. Online source: http://www.lemnsissay.com/oldsite/books/ [08.05.17, 23.54].

In 1981, the *NME* journalist who reviewed the Poetry Olympics at the Young Vic reiterated the connection between dub poetry and punk poetry: 'only virtual open heart-surgery from the likes of John Cooper Clarke and Linton Kwesi Johnson seemed to set the muse's old mama heartbeat pumping the vital juices through the nation's cultural bloodstream' (Spencer, 1981, 52). This article, entitled 'Torch a Light', and with the subheading – 'Neil Spencer visits the Poetry Olympics at the Young Vic and finds out that poets need not be a race apart' – evidences that magazines like *NME* presented Johnson and Clark as closely associated poets and performers. In the article, there are two photographs, one of each poet, with almost identical captions. Clarke's caption reads: 'The Bard of Salford'; a common label ascribed to him. The article interrelates the two by describing Johnson as 'The Bard of Brixton'. They were both seen as 'bards' and chroniclers of their local communities, writing poetry that was concerned with contemporary street life in working class areas of England. Johnson's and Clarke's relationship, as presented in the *NME*, suggests that they should be seen as central participants in their own alternative literary network; that is, a performance poetry network in Britain in the 1970s and '80s.

Johnson's poetry and its engagement with punk have to be understood within a cultural context in which reggae artists in Britain were striving to develop relatively autonomous forms. As Bradley specifies, establishing a set of 'British credentials' for reggae toasting was both a question of sincerity and quality. It is also probable that local pride and a sense of artistic integrity – not wanting to simply copy others – drove artists' efforts. This aspiration to make a British version of reggae is in line with the Caribbean aesthetic tradition outlined in chapter one. At the same time, however, this should not be understood as a nationalist attempt to champion the excellence or superiority of Caribbean art; it is a tradition that argues for the superiority of creating art rooted in one's own experiences and location whatever and wherever that may be. More pertinently, it may even be described as an *attitude*

to writing, which illuminates why the term 'Caribbean aesthetic' is a more suitable term than 'Caribbean *style*'. It is a theorising of art-making, not a specific style prescribing a particular medium.

British reggae artists, like Johnson, who attempted to create an honest and true British reggae expression, had to realise that the Caribbean aesthetic archive was not merely offering 'indigenous' styles that could be reproduced. More importantly, it offered them an approach and attitude to making music (or art more generally). For British reggae artists at the time, associating and mixing with other subcultures like punk and new wave was one way of relocating the cultural attitudes inherited from the Caribbean, adapting them, and making them relevant to a new multicultural urban context in Britain. This cultural mixing was perhaps not so much a deliberate act or judgment of taste for Johnson's generation as simply a consequence of the proximity of these youth subcultures in London. And indeed, Johnson's generation of British reggae artists would be exposed to other kinds of subcultures in their neighbourhoods, in clubs, on the streets, in record stores, and in fashion boutiques.

2.3 'It Dread inna Inglan': Social Realism and Anti-Thatcher Protest, DIY, and 'Hard' Rhetoric

> dem have a likkle facktri up inna Brackly
> inna disya facktri all dem dhu is pack crackry
> fi di laas fifteen years dem get mi laybah
> now awftah fifteen years mi fall out a fayvah (Johnson, 2012, 40).
>
> There is no future
> in England's dreaming – 'God Save the Queen' (The Sex Pistols, 1977). [100]

I now turn to look in more detail at some of the thematic and formal similarities between punk lyrics and Johnson's dub poetry mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These readings reveal Johnson's poetry to be a more specifically and self-consciously British form

[100] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sexpistols/godsavethequeen.html [07.02.17, 21.31].

of expression, though shaped by various multicultural factors and interactions. The features I will foreground include his multicultural version of British social realism and anti-Thatcher Protest, his DIY poetics, and his violent anti-fascist rhetoric.

In the poem 'Inglan is a Bitch', Johnson makes clear that black people in Britain have been victims of oppression and prejudice, and which have undermined their skills and achievements: 'dem seh dat black man is very lazy/ but if yu si how mi wok yu woodah seh mi crazy' (Johnson, 2012, 40). However, the 'black man' in Johnson's poems can also be understood as literally denoting a black *man*. In addition, the emphasis on 'facktri' and 'laybah' links his depiction of black masculinity to issues of class. As will become evident in my comparisons with punk lyricism, his depiction of working class masculinity is central to Johnson's social realist sensibility. Although the term social realism is often associated with Soviet art (also referred to as 'socialist realism'), I here use the term as it applies to British post-war cinema, fiction, and poetry (Tucker, 2011). British social realism in this context primarily refers to aspects of literature concerned to reveal and represent social deprivation and inequality in Britain, of which George Crabbe's poem *The Village* (1783) is often cited as an early precursor. David Tucker claims that the term 'British social realism' is often simplified and misunderstood in ways that overlook the theoretical and historical complexity of the term 'realism': 'perhaps the complexity attendant upon a multiplicity of definitions for the contested term is one reason so few studies have been devoted to the social realism(s) discussed in this volume' (Tucker, 2011, 25). Tucker further argues that the term social realism is best understood as describing individual features of a work: 'the question is not "is this play social realist?" but rather "what is there in this play that is social realist?"' (Tucker, 2011, 9). In accordance with this view, my focus rests on the singular features of Johnson's work that can be understood as social realist. The intention is therefore not to categorise Johnson as a social realist writer *per se*, but to emphasise Johnson's social realist features

which include, as we have seen, his depiction of factory work, labour, unemployment, and violence. Of paramount importance here, though, is his portrayal of the 'troubled' working class male, a frequent character type found in kitchen sink films such as *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *Bronco Bullfrog* (1969), and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) (Hill, 1986).[101]

One example of Johnson's preoccupation with the 'troubled' young working class male can be found in 'Sonny's Lettah', a poem written in the form of a letter from a young black man, who is an inmate in Brixton Prison, to his mother: 'Mama/ more policeman come dung/ an beat mi to di grung;/ dem charge jim fi sus'/ dem charge mi fi murdah' (Johnson, 2006, 29). Johnson chooses a narrative form associated with non-fiction and real-life interaction to further his realist ambitions and documentary sensibility. In 'Sonny's Lettah', Johnson details, body part by body part, the physical violence inflicted by the police: 'dem tump him in him belly/ an it turn to jelly/ dem lick him pan him back/ an him rib get pap/ dem lick him pan him hed/ but it tuff like led/ dem kick him in him seed/ an it started to bleed' (Johnson, 2012, 28). Comparably, 'The Pest' by John Cooper Clarke pays attention to the simultaneously painful and strangely slapstick aspects of police violence: 'the powerful police picked up the pest pronounced him a pinko a pansy a punk rocker and a poof they punched him poked him pummeled his pelvis punctured his pipes played ping-pong with his pubic parts and packed him in a place of penal putrifaction' (Clarke, 2011, 66). The emphasis on these bodily details allows the two poems to dwell on the tragicomic absurdity of the violence. By focusing on 'seed' and 'pelvis' respectively, they accentuate the emasculation that these male figures suffer at the hands of the police. In both examples, the violence is

[101] Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners (1956)*, and its depiction of black masculinity and inner city deprivation in London could in the future be a suitable starting point for further developing and expanding my argument in this thesis that there is a black tradition, in which Johnson participates, feeding into our concept of British social realism and that helps to mould the aesthetic that has been described as 'Brit grit' (Lay, 2002). Magdalena Maczynska similarly argues that Selvon is highly relevant to understanding the realism of contemporary black London literature (Maczynska, 2007, 135–149).

strongly gendered through the portrayal of the abused and 'troubled' working class male. In the third chapter, I will elaborate on the ways in which Johnson oscillates between this gender specific outlook and a more universalist understanding of the 'sufferer', and how he attempts to merge both of these perspectives.

As discussed, the cover of 'Inglan is a Bitch' (Race Today, 1980), with its grey brick wall and graffiti scrawl, connotes the urban decay of Victorian housing in deteriorating working class areas in the 1970s, and so carries associations of the typical post-industrial scenery of kitchen sink realism and the domestic life of working class Britons. In this way, the visual packaging of Johnson's work further highlights the social realist aspect of Johnson's poetry. Benjamin Zephaniah's *Pen Rhythm* (1980) also features a black and white cover, with graffiti written on a wall in front of what looks like the demolition of a council estate. This brings attention to the possibility that this kind of 'slice of life' imagery and its grey micro landscapes are in fact one of the core visual features of Black British 'performance poetry'.

In 'Reality Poem', Johnson rejects 'mitalagy', and declares the late 1970s as the 'age af reality': 'soh mek vi leggo relijan' and 'mek wi hol di clarity' (Johnson, 2006, 36). This emphasis on depicting social realities in a hard-hitting, truthful manner recurs also in the lyrics of The Sex Pistols: 'there is no future in England's dreaming'. How are we to understand this shared interest in 'facing up' to reality instead of finding comfort in myths about the promises and aspirations of life in England? Johnson's poetry describes the violent life on the streets of Brixton in the years running up to the riots in 1981: 'there are sufferers with guns movin breeze through the trees/ there are people waging war in the heat and hunger of the/ streets' (Johnson, 2012, 21). Clarke's poem 'Beezley Street' paints a similarly gloomy image of poverty in inner-city Salford: 'beauty problems are redefined/ the doorbells do not ring/ light bulbs pop like blisters/ the only form of heat/ where a fellow sells his sister/ down

the river on beezley street' (Clarke, 2011, 84). Likewise, the reggae-inspired punk band The Ruts warn: 'Babylon's burning/ you're burning the street/ you're burning your houses/ With anxiety ('Babylon's Burning', 1979).[102] In this interaction between punk and reggae, England's 'ghettos' and what Rastafarians would consider the 'Babylonian' ghettos of Jamaica are engaged in a creative conversation.

The Black British filmmaker and radio DJ Don Letts argues that punk and reggae connected because they shared a working class identity, rallying around a mutual enemy in the 'establishment', as the imagery above appears to highlight.[103] For him, this class dimension is central, and more important even than racial issues in provoking Black British youth's resentment against the establishment (Letts, 2008, 208).[104] A sense of class solidarity across racial identities is voiced in The Clash's '(White Man) in Hammersmith Palais' (1978): 'White youth/ black youth/ Better find another solution/ Why not phone up Robin Hood/ And ask him for some wealth distribution'.[105] This 'anti-establishment' stance is a key consideration that connects Johnson with the punk and new wave scenes. If 'anti-establishment' is a vague term, a closer look at how Johnson and punk bands portray the police allows for a more concrete definition.

In Johnson's poetry, the police and their implementation of the SUS, or 'stop and search', laws are perceived as a distillation of the racist political establishment and their policies, as reflected in poems like 'Street 66', 'All we Doin is Defendin', 'It Dread inna Inglan', 'Sonny's Lettah' and 'New Craas Massakah' (Johnson, 2006). In a similar way, the police often personified the conformist and hypocritical establishment for the punk

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[102] Online source: http://www.lyricsmania.com/babylons_burning_lyrics_ruts_the.html [09.05.17, 00.02].
[103] Don Letts (b. 1956): Black British filmmaker, radio host, and resident DJ in the 1970s at the influential punk venue The Roxy.
[104] Bearing in mind that others, including Dave Laing, argue that a substantial proportion of punks came from the middle classes (Laing, 1984). Lead singer of *The Sex Pistols*' John Lydon's biography is called *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (Lydon, 1994). The title is a good example of purported similarities between white and black working-class experiences in the UK.
[105] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clash/whitemaninhammersmithpalais.html [11.02.17, 17.37].

movement. Punk lyrics targeting law-enforcement proliferate, and include: Angelic Upstarts' 'The Murder of Liddle Towers' (1978), Cockney Rejects' 'Police Car' (1980), and The Clash's cover of Jamaican singer Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves' (1977). In 'New Craas Massakah', the speaker criticises the police and the press for how their handling of the deaths of fourteen young blacks in what many black activists believe to have been a racially motivated arson attack: 'instead a raisin di alarm/ mek di public know wha gwaan/ plenty paypah print pure lie/ fi bline joe public eye/ and di police dem plat an scheme/ canfuse and canceal' (Johnson, 2012, 57).

This is not unlike Angelic Upstarts who in 'The Murder of Liddle Towers' accuse the police of killing the boxing coach Liddle Towers in 1976 while he was in police custody: 'Questions are unanswered/ Policemen scared to talk/ Perhaps they are hiding something/ will my message get across/ Please tell me why, why did he die/ Please tell me now, and tell me how' ('The Murder of Liddle Towers', 1978).[106] In these two anti-police poems, the police are configured as the frontline between the political establishment and the working class. The action of defending one's innocence in this encounter with the justice system thus becomes a way of condemning structural injustice. Similarly, in 'It dread inna Inglan', Johnson proclaims: 'George Lindo/ him is nat no rabbah/ George Lindo/ dem haffi let him go/ George Lindo/ dem bettah free him now!' (Johnson, 2012, 26).[107] As observed earlier, the punk band Sham 69's song 'George Davis is innocent' (1978), chants: 'George Davis is innocent/ George Davis is innocent/ George Davis is innocent/ Okay'.[108] Intriguingly, the song was renamed 'Cockney kids are innocent' on a different B-side, demonstrating how the fight for the innocence and exoneration of some individuals became symbolic of a wider need to 'acquit' the demonisation and criminalisation of a whole working class community. In

[106] Online source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-murder-of-liddle-towers-lyrics-angelic-upstarts.html [11.02.17, 17.47].
[107] George Lindo was a Jamaican worker living in Bradford who was convicted of robbery. Johnson and The Black Panther movement created the George Lindo Defence Committee to support his plea for innocence.
[108] Online source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/george-davis-is-innocent-lyrics-sham-69.html [08.05.17, 00.06].

both examples, the name of a particular male suspect becomes a slogan and the repetition is phrased as an uncompromising demand for justice: 'Georg Davis is innocent', 'Georg Lindo/ dem bettah free him now'. These poems may direct their anger at the police, but in 'Time for Truth' (1977) by The Jam, these specific institutions are used to explore much deeper structural problems in British society: 'And you're trying for a police state/ So you can rule our body and minds/ what ever happened to the great empire?/ You bastards have turned it into manure'.[109] The police become a convenient metaphor for the various social inequalities, discriminations and injustices that plagued post-imperial Britain.

Though there are differences in emphasis, Johnson and punk performers also both attack the idea of England as a 'great nation', as the lyrics of Johnson's 'Inglan is a Bitch' and The Sex Pistols' 'God save the Queen' both indicate. As John Savage observes, '"God save the queen" was shocking, not only because it said the present was a lie but also because it prophesied a dreadful future' (Savage, 1991, 355). Both Johnson and The Sex Pistols convey the sense of disappointment and disillusionment with the idea of English 'greatness'. In Johnson's bleak portrayal of England, the black man carries out all the usual low-paid jobs and tries to do the right thing by working hard, even though 'dem seh that black man is very lazy' (Johnson, 2007, 35). Regardless of his aspirations, he soon feels that England is a grey, cold, and depressing country. Johnson offers a commentary on how many West-Indian immigrants arrived with unrealistic expectations of what the colonial 'motherland' would offer (Dawson, 2007, 2). Don Letts explains the difference between his and his parents' generation: 'My parents had a framed picture of the queen in our living-room. My generation was better educated and had a worldlier view, and there was no way we could follow them down that path. We thought "hang on, we have got fuck all to be grateful for"' (Letts, 2007, 27). 'Inglan is a Bitch' can be read as an expression of this change of sentiment and

[109] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jam/timefortruth.html [11.02.17, 17.52].

generational gap. The same thing can be said of The Sex Pistols' 'God save the Queen', which portrays a similar experience of belonging to a generation that refuses to subscribe to patriotic narratives about British greatness: 'God save the queen/ the fascist regime/ they made you a moron/ Potential H-bomb'.[110] The phrase 'fascist regime' is particularly trenchant, ridiculing British democracy and mocking the Allied Power's war against fascism in World War II, both cornerstones of British pride and liberal self-perception (Gilroy, 1992, xxv). It also highlights the generation gap between the Baby Boomers, or Generation X as they also came to be known, and the Greatest Generation, who had a stronger awareness of, and thus were more sensitive to, words such as fascism.[111]

For The Sex Pistols, the Queen represents and embodies everything they dislike about England, and Britain more generally. When Johnson says that 'Inglan is a Bitch', the expression 'bitch' is governed by connotations that relates the nation not only to the feminised character of the Queen, but also to Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time.[112] Alternatively, Johnson's use of 'bitch' may be an example of the more gender-neutral jargon of 'that's a bitch'. Regardless of whether or not this is a misogynist statement, the tone is unarguably crass, even disrespectful, towards England, and possibly to Thatcher, in a way that is comparable to The Sex Pistols' anti-patriotic provocations.

However, Johnson and the punk movement's anti-patriotism are more complicated than this. Somewhat paradoxically, there might actually be a kind of anti-establishment patriotism that emerges through their negation of traditional patriotism. 'God save the queen' has, after all, been branded an 'anti-National Anthem' (Paytress, 1999, 33). This term

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[110] Online source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sexpistols/godsavethequeen.html [11.02.17, 18.34].

[111] The 'Greatest Generation' refers to those who fought in World War II (Brokaw, 2002). Baby Boomers are often defined as those born in the years between 1946 and 1964. Lastly, Generation X describes those born following the Baby Boomers, though it is sometimes more loosely defines those born between the early to mid 1960s and late 1970s, and therefore overlaps somewhat with the Baby Boomers (Craig, 1997).

[112] For a thorough feminist critique of punk, see Leraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (Leblanc, 1999).

conveys that, although it is 'anti-establishment', it nevertheless remains a 'national' anthem. The Sex Pistols' covers and posters often appropriate and deconstruct British iconography, such as the Union Jack and pictures of the Queen, demonstrating that they are themselves a British product nonetheless. It is likely no coincidence that a fan video of 'Inglan is a Bitch' uploaded onto YouTube uses the exact same iconography. It takes the video of Johnson's performance from Old Grey Whistle Test in 1980 and places it over a background image of the Union Jack (figure 4). Because Johnson is talking about the problems of being black in England, this nevertheless recalls the idea that he is a British product, and a British poet talking about issues that concerned people in Britain specifically (as distinct from people in the Caribbean).

In 'It Dread inna Inglan', Johnson claims ownership over the country and constructs a form of anti-establishment patriotism in which Margaret Thatcher 'wid a racist show', rather than immigrants, is seen as the real threat to the nation: 'Maggi Tactha on di go/ wid a racist show/ but a she haffi go' (Johnson, 2006, 25.[113] The attack on Thatcher also places him in the context of a wider anti-Thatcherism protest culture in popular music during the late 1970s – yet another example of how the co-presence of punk weaves into his *oeuvre*. For example, the 2-tone band The Beat had a single called 'Stand down Margaret' (1980), whilst the anarcho-punk band Crass asked in their song 'How does it feel' (1982), 'how does is feel to be the mother of a thousand dead'? Meanwhile, The Notsensibles recorded a tongue-in-cheek single title declaring 'I'm in love with Margaret Thatcher' (1979). All these bands deliberately play with iconic British images and symbols, and through these reject, or mock, a set of traditional British values attached to the monarchy, upper class and propriety, in order both to criticise, but also display, if grudgingly, an affection for Britain: 'far noh matta wat dey say,/ come wat may,/ we are here to stay/ inna Inglan,/ inna disya time yah' (Johnson,

[113] See also 'Margaret Thatcher: The Villain of Political Pop' in *The Guardian* (Lynskey, 2013).

2006, 25). This affection is directed towards an ownership of Britain as *home*, one that has paradoxically provided the symbols and images that these groups negate and subvert in order to form their own specifically British identity. Johnson's social realist style and his attacks on England and Britain thus counter-intuitively serve to enhance his Englishness and 'Britishness' in provocative ways.

2.3.1 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet': the DIY Poet

Having established some of the thematic and formal similarities between Johnson and punk artists in regards to their social realism, and particularly their depiction of police harassment and anti-Thatcherism, I will now explore further similarities in their self-perception and their understanding of their own artistry. As we will see in the following, Johnson and punk artists both prioritise creative independence, personal energy and punchy impact over professionalism or perfectionism in their writing practice. For a start, in 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', Johnson playfully name-drops a list of supposedly 'Tap-Natch' poets: 'if I woz a tap-natch poet/ like Chris Okigbo/ Derek Walcot/ ar T.S. Eliot/ I woodah write a poem/ soh dyam deep/ dat it bittah-sweet/ like a precious/ memari/ whe mek yu weep/ whe mek yu feel incomplete' (Johnson, 2006, 94).[114] Every stanza mentions a new group of poets and concludes with the self-assertive statement: 'Still/ inna di meantime/ wid mi riddim/ wid mi rime/ wid mi ruff base line/ wid mi own sense a time' (Johnson, 2006, 95). Johnson claims that even though he might not be on the list of these 'tap natch' poets, it is more important that he remains committed to his own individual style. This meta-commentary about his *poetics*, where individual style is superior to canonicity, indicates that this 'doing it yourself',

[114] Johnson misspells Walcott when he writes 'Walcot'. If deliberate, then this could be a way of demonstrating that he does not want to be perceived 'tap-natch' and an indication that he performs his lack of interest in academic training, perfectionism, and professionalism.

or DIY approach to creative practice informs his own poetry writing, rather than any desire to be 'tap-natch' in a conventional British lyrical sense.

This notion of the DIY can be expanded, on the one hand, to include styles other than punk and genres that adhere to poetic traditions in the Caribbean. DIY, as a poetic practice, overlaps in important ways with Kamau Brathwaite's emphasis on creating one's own Caribbean perceptual models and 'environmental expressions' for poetry (Brathwaite, 1984, 8–9). Yet, on the other hand, Johnson also cites the new wave movement as a source of inspiration in an interview with Chris May, when he launched his independent record label LKJ (May, 1981, 16). He also explicitly refers to the new wave movement as an inspiration for his own entry into the music business:

> That's one of the things I learnt from the so-called new wave revolution: what happened with that was that a lot of white bands just seemed to do their own thing. And for a lot of them it turned out OK. So the idea was to create an alternative to what the big record companies were offering unknown artists; to lay the basis, even if it's in embryonic form, of an independent movement away from the big record companies (May, 1981, 16).

An NME Article by Charles Shaar Murray, titled 'Indie or not Indie', similarly positions Johnson, a Black British reggae artist, in an 'Indie' or Independent record label context (see Figure 5). LKJ Records was distributed by Rough Trade, one of the most important British distributors of indie, punk, and new wave music in the 1970s and '80s. Interestingly, Rough Trade mentions Johnson beneath the indie band The Libertines in their back-catalogue of artists.[115] The link between LKJ Records and Rough Trade demonstrates how Johnson was working from within a networked subcultural context that placed emphasis on both DIY and independent labels.

Letts correctly points out that punk took a great deal more from reggae than reggae ever took from punk (Letts, 2005, 143). However, like Goldman, he recognises that the punk movement also influenced British reggae in numerous, albeit subtle and mostly covert, ways:

[115] Online source: http://www.roughtraderecords.com/artists [09.05.17, 00.09]. The Libertines was formed in 1997 by Carl Barât and Pete Doherty. They were an important part of the so-called garage rock revival of the early 2000s.

‘What I picked up most from mixing with the punks was a new way of approaching things – that whole punk DIY ethic. In Third World countries, the DIY ethic is second nature, it is DIY or die’ (Letts, 2005,100). Letts credits punk for popularizing DIY as a creative ethic in the late 1970s, though he also appreciates DIY as having a wider relevance beyond the punk movement and resembling creative processes widely practiced in so-called ‘Third World’ countries. Reggae music is one example of this. In reggae music, innovation and creation have often been a result of using whatever one has at hand, from home-made equipment and hardware to the appropriation or ‘remixing’ of the work of others.

As we have seen, Brathwaite proclaimed that Caribbean poets had to find their own modes of expression, rather than imitating the European canon (Brathwaite, 1971, 311). This approach also has a recognizable DIY element that essentially questions the consensus expressed in the English canon formation about what makes poetry ‘tap natch’. Brathwaite urges Caribbean poets to ‘do it yourself’, instead of adhering to the literary traditions of European colonialism. Brathwaite promotes DIY through his encouragement of Caribbean poets to write poetry rooted in their own perceptual models (find your own mode of expression), and to appropriate other people’s work (use your own instruments). As this suggests, DIY forms a crucial crossing point between punk, reggae, and nation language poetry, and so serves as a particularly fruitful example of how the interaction between punk and reggae offers new ways of reading Johnson’s work. DIY reflects a cultural environment in Britain shaped by punk and new wave, two forces that moulded Johnson’s work, whilst it simultaneously recognises that ‘Caribeanness’ and ‘Britishness’ are not mutually exclusive within Johnson’s *oeuvre*. Forming a complementary and dialogical relationship, punk and new wave helped Johnson to put into practice the DIY concept that he had, in effect, already come to embrace through Caribbean role models like Kamau Brathwaite and Jamaican deejays.

Punk was in part a reaction to the genres of stadium and progressive rock that had become increasingly technical, defining itself instead through its energy, authenticity and unpolished style (Savage, 1991). As Johnson himself comments:

> If I have achieved anything, I feel that what I have achieved, in Britain at least, is to show the black youth of England or young black people in England that you don't have to be immersed in classical literature or to have been to a university to write poetry that strikes a common chord of response among your peer group (Morris, 1989, 261).

Viewed retrospectively, Johnson's conviction that anyone can write poetry shares a great deal with the punk movement's principle that everyone can form a band, and they both share a skepticism towards technical virtuosity and academicism. Johnson's democratic and anti-hierarchical philosophy about creative practice is integral to his DIY approach, and he challenges exclusive understandings of who ought to write poetry. As Johnson puts it in his lecture, 'Writing Reggae: Poetry, Politics and Popular Culture': 'I am, after all, a middle-aged Black British Caribbean poet of the "little tradition". Let the guardians of the "great tradition" stand at ease' (Johnson, 2005).[116] Johnson's DIY is not about not achieving canonicity, as Johnson's rising status show; it is about saying that there are other aesthetic criteria that are more important than greatness or genius. Like many of his punk contemporaries, Johnson literally and metaphorically gives the middle finger to the guardians of good taste

2.3.2 'Fite Dem Back': Violent Anti-Fascism and 'Hard' Rhetoric

As should by now be evident, Johnson's interaction with subcultures is not only relevant to his historical reception *per se*, but is also relevant to understandings his creative output and stylistic development. In addition to introducing new critical frameworks to the academic scholarship on Johnson, the punk perspective also sheds new light on the confrontational and polemical anti-racist themes in his poetry that have been widely studied and discussed. In this

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[116] This is an unpublished lecture sent to me by Johnson via email. It was presented when he was awarded the Musgrave Medal for his work in the field of poetry by the Institute of Jamaica.

penultimate section, I will show that the black radical messages and anti-racist stance for which his poetry is most celebrated are also shaped by the subcultural networks in which he takes part, despite the fact that these networks have often been associated with white (seemingly apolitical) audiences. An exemplification of the ways in which Johnson's anti-racist rhetoric was shaped by the subcultural movements in Britain at the time, Robert Hampson writes that 'Linton Kwesi Johnson's work broke into the youth scene as other forms of protest in Britain such as punk, the anti-Nazi league and gay rights activism formed coalitions to fight what were perceived as common problems and a common enemy' (Hampson, 1993, 57). The aspects of Johnson's poetry that at first seem unambiguously to correspond to black radical consciousness, such as anti-racism and anti-fascism, should still be read as creolized expressions formed in dialogue with adjoining subcultural sentiments and trends.

Johnson's poetry changed considerably in the years between the publication of *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) and *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980). Generally speaking, the poetry became more militant as he switched from Standard English to Jamaican patois. Furthermore, there was a clear shift away from his more metaphorical writing in 'Voices of the Living and the Dead': 'There is a scar…/ ECHO: A scar… a scar…a scar…a scar/ DEAD: On the finest flower of history's spring-time garden' (Johnson, 1988, 9). This differs considerably from his usage of straightforward, confrontational language in poems like 'Inglan is a Bitch' and 'Fite Dem Back'. 'Inglan is a Bitch' offers a less elliptical, more direct and aggressive sentiment, as the title indicates, while 'Fite Dem Back' (1979) encapsulates the radical break from his earliest work: 'we gonna smash their brains in/ Cause they ain't got no fink in 'em […] fashist an di attack/ Noh baddah worry 'bout dat/ fashist an di attack/ Wi

wi' fite dem back'.[117] The poem promotes a militant anti-fascism and is considerably more combative in tone. In 'Voices of the Living and the Dead', the struggle of blacks is implied through metaphors of ancestors and echoes of the past. Here, the struggle is no longer implied, but made explicit, and the poem shifts towards the rhetoric of the slogan or campaign song. Pertinently for this reading of Johnson's work in the late 1970s in relation to other movements at the time, punk in fact gives tools to decipher the violent anti-fascist rhetoric of 'Fite Dem Back'.

The first stanza caricatures a cockney accent and mocks the typical abuses and slogans shouted by National Front members. Jamaican patois comes into conflict with a caricatured or stylized, working-class English population in the poem. This again demonstrates how Johnson's poetry both overtly and covertly comments on and engages with blacks' relationship with the white working class. The racist slogans of segments of the white working class are inverted through subversive appropriation and turned into an anti-fascist slogan. Furthermore, the cockney accent is transformed from the voice of the enemy (the fascists) into a militant anti-fascist voice. Yet, the racist message of the first voice is not cancelled out by the second anti-racist voice. Johnson embraces the cockney accents and the working class's place in anti-fascist struggle, while also warning of the racism and nationalism that was perceived as circulating within this group (fears of immigration, competition for jobs etc.) (Lydon, 1994, 374).

When seen from this perspective, 'Fite Dem Back' exhibits the increasing tension between National Front supporters and the mobilisation of self-declared anti-fascist musical movements that arose in response. Simon Reynolds brands 'Fite Dem Back' an *anti-fascist anthem* and links the song closely to the rise of a new and particular kind of left-wing culture manifested in the Rock Against Racism movement: 'The Forces of Victory album (featuring

[117] Online source: http://www.metrolyrics.com/fite-dem-back-lyrics-linton-kwesi-johnson.html [11. 02.17, 19.28]. First released on the album *Forces of Victory* (1979).

'Fite Dem Back', ed.) was a massive record among a certain community – Peel listeners, student radical RAR types in 1979, the years of its release' (Reynolds, 2008). The Rock Against Racism movement (RAR), active between 1976 and 1981, grew out of the same post-war British political context of tensions between right and left-wing politics, tensions that played out in popular music culture. The movement was at first created as a response to a rise of far-right sentiments that on occasion borrowed Nazi symbolism.[118] Members of the Socialist Workers Party, who wanted the left to reclaim popular music and subculture from right-wing politics, were primarily those who drove the organisation of RAR forward (Goodyer, 2009). Punk and reggae were the two genres most closely associated with the movement, as demonstrated in 'Fite Dem Back', which displays the new radical anti-racist sentiment shared, as we saw, with punk and 2-tone bands, such as The Clash and The Specials. The Specials in fact self-identified as anti-fascist and left-wing during this period. Johnson's rhetoric of militant anti-fascism can thus be read as partaking in a wider subcultural, networked and anti-fascist identity epitomised in the creation of Rock Against Racism.[119]

Johnson was, without doubt, engaged in anti-racist activism irrespective of RAR. My suggestion, however, is that the cultural climate in which RAR occurred can help us comprehend his *rhetorical turn* from elliptical and allegorical narratives to a more explicitly violent anti-fascist rhetoric. One of the problems that led to the intensification of RAR's anti-racist agitation in the 1970s was the increasing large-scale physical confrontations between the left and its political opponents: 'physical security was consequently a vital consideration' (Goodyer, 2009, 147). The confrontational anti-fascism of 'Fite Dem Back'

[118] An outburst by Eric Clapton, in which he embraced Enoch Powell, is considered to have been the main trigger (Goodyer, 2009, 10).
[119] Johnson was critical of some aspects of RAR, and particularly of the way sections of the primarily white left and SWP approached racism (Lott, 1978). However, this criticism does not imply that the generation-defining emergence of RAR did not have a significant impact on the cultural climate in which his anti-fascism took shape.

was an expression of the hardening political climate that also led to RAR. As Ashley Dawson observes: ‘Despite its links to established organisations of the far Left, RAR succeeded in uniting aesthetics and politics in a radical new way by drawing on rather than preaching to youth subcultures of the day’ (Dawson, 2005, 1). What is immediately striking about RAR is that it united a distinctly ‘street’ poetics and politics in a very effective way. Correspondingly, the political message in ‘Fite Dem Back’ may seem forthright enough, but we have to recognise that the radicalism of the message was also coded aesthetically. Although Johnson’s anti-racist convictions were independent of punk, the form and style in which these convictions gained expression were not.

There are various reasons for Johnson’s radical rhetorical modulation from ‘springtime gardens’ in ‘Voices of the Living and the Dead’ to ‘bitch’ in ‘Inglan is a Bitch’. One of the most decisive was the Notting Hill riots of 1976, and the general intensification of racial tensions in the years leading up to the Brixton riots in 1981. As already anticipated, we might also speculate that the presence of punk in the British public sphere could have been a factor in pushing Johnson’s poetry in a more confrontational direction into the 1980s. John Cooper Clarke captures punks’ aggressive sentiment in his poem ‘I don’t wanna be nice’: ‘the last thing I need is another friend/ i don’t wanna be nice’ (Clarke, 2012, 75). Johnson, like Clarke, challenges norms of respectability and politeness and warns the establishment: ‘soh lissen man/ get ready fi tek some blows’ (Johnson, 2006, 11). The cover of the *Dread Beat an’ Blood* album (1981 reissue) shows an image of Johnson with a megaphone, which encapsulates his image as a fearless and vocal radical unafraid to speak truth to power. Yet, at the same time, and as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, punk clearly also had an influence on rhetorical interventions which sought to make a scandalous, rude, or obscene statement in the British public sphere, especially in the aftermath of the Sex Pistols'

provocative album *Never Mind the Bollocks* in 1977.[120] Artists who were not necessarily defined as punk were forced to develop strategies in order to navigate this new level of rhetorical intensity.

Resembling the strategy of the RAR campaigns, Johnson's radical image and reputation is coded aesthetically and can be seen as constructed through his use of both rhetorical and visual cues. Ian Goodyer proposes that RAR was a continuation of a 'radical culture' with origins in the militant counter-cultural struggles of 1968 (Goodyer, 2009). He does not define what he means by 'radical culture', but the term implies that left-wing radicalism is not only defined by a set of political opinions: it has an aesthetic dimension that constructs radicalism through particular visual representations and rhetorical choices. RAR's achievement, Goodyer argues, was its example of 'politico-cultural fusion' that served as an inspiration for others (Goodyer, 2009, 159). The visual 'cut and paste' and DIY profile of RAR's own magazine *Temporary Hoarding* was far from coincidental, exactly because it understood the importance of immersing itself in a radical aesthetic. Reggae and punk were the main genres of RAR, as Johnson's use of both cockney and Jamaican patois in 'Fite Dem Back' reflects. Anti-racism henceforth was not an exclusive pursuit of black radicals and their allies, but something on the agenda of a much broader cultural framework, with 80,000 people for example attending a RAR gig in Victoria Park in 1978 (Goodyer, 2009). Johnson's rhetoric of violent anti-fascism in 'Fite Dem Back' should therefore be seen in relation to how anti-racism and radicalism was constructed in his contemporary context, both politically and aesthetically. Of particular note is the way in which his 'hard' anti-fascist rhetoric was shaped by the cultural climate of RAR and its creolization of punk and reggae subcultures in the late 1970s.

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[120] This focus on provocation can be seen as a continuation of the dada and situationist avant-garde tactics that were appropriated and re-actualised by punk in the 1970s. Particularly relevant are the main features of the avant-garde manifesto as defined by Marjorie Perloff: violence, clarity, and precision (Perloff, 1984).

In conclusion, then, at the heart of Johnson's tough and intimidating rhetoric, his anti-aesthetic DIY cover art and anti-establishment arrogance, there is, as with punk lyricism, an attempt to say something heartfelt about the need for social change in Britain: 'bittah cause a blues/ cause a maggot suffering/ cause a blood klaat pressure/ yet still breedin love/ far more mellow' (Johnson, 2006, 15). Behind the 'blood klaats' and rudeness can be found a cogent and sophisticated critique of how society was mistreating and marginalizing an entire generation of young black people. Johnson and the punk movement could unite in their understanding that Babylon, a metaphor for the place of exile from Africa or paradise taken from Rastafari (Edmonds, 2012, 41), was to be found right here, right now, here in London: 'The ice age is coming/ The sun's zooming in/ Engines stop running and the wheat is growing thin/ A nuclear error, but I have no fear/ London is drowning – and I live by the river ('London Calling', 1979).[121]

2.4 LKJ's Persona and Public Image

In this closing section, I will consolidate my reading of Johnson's public image as formed by his interaction with the punk and new wave movements, and other affiliated subcultures and countercultures in which British reggae and punk facilitated a revived interest.[122] I want to focus on three aspects of his image in particular: first, the way in which Johnson embodied both 'hipster' and 'black radical' features; second, his image as primarily a journalist, librarian, and reggae scholar, not as a reggae musician; and finally, how he was seen as a stylish 'rude boy'. Through an examination of interviews and reviews in the alternative music press, I will show how these features were shaped by the fact that Johnson was operating

[121] Lyrics printed in The Clash's album *London Calling*, CBS Records, 1979. For more about Johnson's portrayal of London as 'Babylon burning' see John McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (McLeod, 2004).

[122] Stuart Hall distinguishes between the terms 'subculture' and 'counterculture'. The former refers to mainly working-class youth cultures that are often perceived as apolitical or even'delinquent', while the latter refers to primarily middle-class youth and student cultures, which are often explicitly political and generally recognised as protest movements (Hall, 1976, 57).

within a British cultural context where reggae music was seen as an urban subculture related to other urban subcultures and countercultures that were popular at that time, or that were experiencing a revival. Reggae in Britain was therefore not primarily classified as 'world music' or an indigenous cultural form. I will explore Johnson's place within what punk and reggae critic Vivien Goldman termed a 'hipster poetry 'n' jazz context', which includes punk and reggae, but which also draws upon a wider set of wider subcultural, alternative, and countercultural influences. For example, the rude-boy fashion and style that originated in the 1960s in Jamaica (Bradley, 2001, 186), stayed popular in the UK throughout the 1970s by the punk movement and the related mod-revival and 2-tone phenomena. The punk context helps us to see how this style label was familiar to British punk journalists, and therefore why this image could be attributed to Johnson. The punk context also shows us that Johnson's persona and image had a broad appeal in Britain because he resonated with pre-existing trends, and could be placed in the existing cultural landscape in a way that helped to effectively establish and convey his specifically British identity and image. Furthermore, beat poetry and the ideals of the 'hipster', as we will see, was another cultural framework that the punk and new wave movement revived and re-established, and is therefore relevant to a deeper understanding and positioning of Johnson's work.

According to the Oxford English dictionary, the definition of hipster (a slang term originating from 'hepcat) is 'one who is hip'. Today, it is commonly used to describe someone who is 'in- the-know' about what is considered cool.[123] In the 1950s it was, however, used to refer to radicals and members of the beat and jazz generation. In Norman Mailer's essay 'The White Negro' from 1957, he describes a new generation of 'American existentialists': 'So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed

[123] Online Source: 'hipster, n.1.' OED online. Oxford University Press [09.05.17, 15.01].

the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro' (Mailer, 1957). Mailer describes a process in which black culture becomes an important force in how the concept of hip became constructed. Goldman's description of Johnson as being halfway 'hipster poetry 'n' jazz' and the griot, as we will see, was just one particular expression of this rather widespread, complex, and sometimes fraught relationship between black music and the hipster, but now re-actualised in a British 1970s context largely due to the presence of punk and related subcultures.

Johnson's first album *Dread Beat an' Blood* set music to many of the lyrics in his second volume of poems *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975*)*. Goldman reviews this transition from print to record in *Sounds* (August 1978):

> Johnson has taken the obvious step, and set the distilled passion of his words to music, continuing a tradition halfway between hipster poetry 'n' jazz and that of the *griot*, the African storyteller of antiquity, chanting histories of wars over the beating of tribal talking drums to carry his message over the African land. If we trace Johnson's line of descent back through all cultures, we hear a cross-link with blind poets in market places in Ancient Greece, too, transmuting their history into spontaneous verse (Goldman, 1978).

The term *griot* refers to an oral tradition of storytelling from West Africa (Finnegan, 1970, 96). [124] The awareness of Johnson as an intermediating and 'halfway' artist between West Africa/the Caribbean and Britain, illustrates how he was seen as upholding at least two traditions at once, a rather vague lineage of urban 'hipster poetry', and another, similarly indeterminate, tradition of black poetics.[125] As I have tried to suggest, it is possible that Johnson became an influential poet precisely because he managed to merge these two categories. In so doing, he perpetuated the tendency in reggae's reception in Britain (via both his poetry and criticism about reggae) to frame it not as 'world music', but rather as 'hip',

[124] This featured prominently in 1920s and 1930s negritude poetry, for instance that of Léopold Senghor, and was often supplemented with confrontational surrealist strategies (Harney, 2004). Johnson explicitly mentions that he experimented with surrealism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that he read surrealist poets and negritude writers such Senghor and Aimé Césaire. In addition to these, he also he read the work of related writers sich as Christopher Okigbo and Tchicaya U Tam'si (Caesar, 1996, 65).

[125] According to Ruth Finnegan, *griot* is a quasi-technical term that is used too broadly: 'Though it was presumably originally a translation of the Fulano *gaoulo* (wandering poet or praiser) or Wolof *gewel* (poet and musician), it is now popularly used as a term to refer to almost any kind of poet or musician throughout at the least the French-speaking areas of West-Africa' (Finnegan, 1970, 96).

subcultural, and urban.[126] His image is clearly twofold, and it is crucial to have these two elements – the griot and the hipster – in mind as we read Johnson's poetry. Yet, the focus here is to attempt to understand the frequently overlooked 'other' hipster-context, and to explore why these elements are deeply intertwined and dependent on each other.

Goldman's association of Johnson with the spontaneous oral poetry of ancient Greece shows that from 1978, in a firmly musical context, there was awareness of the fact that Johnson was primarily a poet and a *literary* figure. The musical reception did not obscure or diffuse the sense of Johnson belonging to the literary world; rather, it helped to launch and formulate Johnson's specific image and character as a then contemporary kind of Black British hipster poet. His audience as a performer, and his interaction with music critics, significantly shaped Johnson's image and even allowed him to take up a privileged role as 'the poet' in these circles, one he shared with John Cooper Clarke. Whilst his association with this hip music scene might distinguish him from many other poets in the English canon, it also, as Goldman hints, associates him with a tradition of other English language 'hipster 'n' jazz' poets from the post-war period such as Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, and the Black Mountain Poets, as well as the Liverpool poets in the UK, who all together created what can be called pop-based or pop-derived poetry. His artistic alignment with these poets turns out to not to only be a result of his style of writing, but also a by-product of his image, self-presentation, and persona, that was largely shaped by his coverage in the punk and new wave music press and his own music journalism.

2.4.1 The Political Hipster

Goldman ascribes a hipster status to Johnson, but there is no doubt in Goldman's review that she is dealing with a highly political record nevertheless. She concludes the review by

[126] For more on the relationship between black music and various musical subcultures in the UK, see Lloyd Bradley's *Sounds Like London: 100 years of Black Music in the Capital* (Bradley, 2013).

writing: ‘it's agreed by everyone I know heard it that *Dread Beat an' Blood* is the most militant reggae album, British or Jamaican’ (Goldman, 1978). *Dread Beat an*’ *Blood* is shaped by a strong militant sentiment that runs through the melody and the lyrics: ‘All we doing/ is defending/ so feet you ready, fi war…war…/ freedom is a very firm thing’ (Johnson, 2006, 11). But the militant message and the hipster image he embodied were not two opposing viewpoints. Whereas Ginsberg’s ‘negro streets’ stand, though in a somewhat troubling primitivist sense, as a metaphor for coolness, darkness, and danger, Johnson sheds light on and so demystifies the real political challenges that many blacks faced. Considering this substantial difference in perspective and privilege, why were the 'hipster’ and ‘the black radical’ viewed as complementary at this moment in time? Goldman describes Johnson as someone who principally dealt with the unfolding present:

> Linton's verse is not extempore on the spot, and equally, it doesn't deal with history. It deals with the present, the ongoing, with friends of his wrongfully jailed, with people he's never met whose political plight he elevates to mythic, heroic proportions, every warrior style (Goldman, Sounds, 1978).

One obvious link between his hipster identity and black radical consciousness is that they were both essentially results of contemporary trends and sensibilities, sparked by Johnson’s present moment and surroundings as a black man living in London.

The hipster-militant combination is unmistakably naturalised in Johnson’s

poetry, which often portrays political violence and confrontation taking place at a musical event or party: ‘di room woz dark-dusk howlin softly/ six-a-clack,/ charcoal late defying site woz/ movin black;/ di soun woz muzic mellow steady flow,/ an man-son mind jus mystic red,/ green, red, green…pure scene’ (Johnson, 2006, 9). The scene captures the familiar trope of the laid-back, smoke-filled, and dimly-lit nightclub or party; it emits coolness in an archetypal way that we can recognise from scenes in beat poetry, film noir, and French New Wave. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* offers a characteristic example of this kind of scene and mood:

> angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness

of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating Jazz (Ginsberg, 2009 [1955], lines 5–7).

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Like Ginsberg and the beat poets, Johnson often combines the imagery of night, music, and smoke – in his case, the smoke of marijuana. In 'Five Night of Bleeding', the emphasis on madness, paranoia, and 'bad trips' is reminiscent of the Beats: 'madness… madness…/ madness tight on the heads of rebels/ the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast/ broke glass' (Johnson, 2006, 6). Relatedly, Ginsberg writes in *Howl*; 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix (Ginsberg, 2009, lines 1–4). The emphasis on violence, drugs, darkness, and madness, and the mention of a particular form of underground music underpinning the scene – jazz for Ginsberg and dub for Johnson – is present in the work of both authors. It is not difficult to understand why Johnson and the Beat poets might appeal to the same readers.

This being said, Johnson's poems often culminate in the police breaking into the party and ruining the groovy and relaxed atmosphere of the musical space: 'Open up! It's the police! Open up!' (Johnson, 2006, 10). The insistent interruption of the police symbolises the racial politics that are literally knocking on the door of the poem, interrupting the 'mellow steady flow' of the party. In Johnson's poems, black radicalism and hip culture therefore confront each, prompting the reader to move between indulgence in cool subcultures and the constant intrusion of a political reality which blocks or shuts them down: 'hours beat di scene movin rite/ when all of a sudden/ bam bam bam a knockin pan di door' (Johnson, 2006, 10). The repetition of 'bam bam bam' gives the knocking a rhythmic though slightly light-hearted effect that contrasts sharply with the police harassment that is about to take place. In addition, the choice of the Jamaican onomatopoeic 'bam' over the more conventional 'knock' also adds to the reggae party vibe in the poem. In 'Five Nights of Bleeding', 'New Cross

Messiah', 'Youth Scene', and 'Bass culture', we find a similar build-up and progression, where a cool mellow mood evolves into violent confrontation with the police. This constant intervention and disruption brings attention to the harassment many blacks faced under the SUS laws.

As I have shown at length, Johnson was exposed to subcultural sentiments and black radical influences simultaneously. He was strongly influenced by the British Black Panther Party and the emerging Black British and Caribbean literary scene, especially New Beacon Books and the legacy of John La Rose (Morris, 1989), as explored in detail in the first chapter. Even today he stresses the importance of this black radical tradition on his literary education:

> Under the influence of another political and cultural mentor, the publisher John La Rose, Johnson was introduced to African, Caribbean and American writers. "I discovered the Francophone poets such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. I discovered Nicolás Guillén from Cuba and Pablo Neruda from Chile, as well as the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Hermann Hesse - hip authors of the early 70s. And I eventually discovered people such as Shelley and the radical English tradition (Wroe, 2008).

Interestingly, he refers to 'hip authors of the early 70s' alongside other African, Caribbean and American writers, discovering them at the same point in his literary education. For Johnson, these writers were inextricably a part of the same historical and cultural moment: namely, the rise of a radical, and independently driven, black political consciousness in the late 1970s in Britain. Black political consciousness, and a general conception of what was cool, organically flowed into each other, and eventually into his poetry.

It is revealing that Johnson uses the irregular literary category 'hip' to describe a group of authors. Johnson's and Goldman's comments about hip writing confirm that it was a term which, in their eyes, made sense as a literary category. For Johnson, moreover, 'hip' united African and Caribbean writers with Sartre and Hesse. When Johnson subsequently mentions Shelley and the English radical tradition, it becomes pertinent to ask historically how far back the concept of 'hip' literature can be extended. Significantly, Johnson's complex web of different influences disregards the high/low cultural distinction entirely,

instead organising writers into alternative categories like 'hip' or 'radical'. This in turn raises challenging questions about how we might define, or indeed how we should limit, the scope of his influences. Regardless of how conscious Johnson was of taking part in the hipster genealogy derivative of jazz and beat poetry that, following Goldman, I have mapped out here, we can clearly see hints of his enthusiasm for these connections reflected in his interest in engaging with contemporaneous trends in philosophy, literature, politics, music, and fashion. In particular, he is interested in engaging with subcultures arising from his own historical present, and incorporating literature that resonates with, and that is revived by, the zeitgeist, trends, and sensibilities of that particular moment.

2.4.2 The Writer, Librarian, and Reggae Scholar

In another article on Johnson by Goldman from the same year (September 1978), an interview in this instance, it becomes evident that Johnson was at the time perceived mainly as a writer and critic. Goldman begins the interview by noting that many influential music writers associated with the *NME* and *Sounds* – David Fudger, Charley Murrey[127] Mick Farren,[128] and Nick Kent[129] – had recently started to make music, and she positions Johnson in this trend. Observing that Johnson used to write reggae reviews for the *Melody Maker*, and had contributed to journals including *New Society*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Race Today*, *West Indian World*, and *Race and Class*, she notes: 'he's even written some reggae reviews for us' (Goldman, 1978). Goldman's opinion, however, is that Johnson stands out from the other writers making music,

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[127] Charles Shaar Murray (b. 1951): Writer for the *NME* and many other magazines, including *Mojo*, *The Guardian* and *Q Magazine*. Author of *David Bowie: An Illustrated Record* (1981), *Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix and Post-War Pop* (1989), a musical biography of Jimi Hendrix, and *From The Hip* (1991), a selection of journalistic writing.

[128] Mick Farrren (1943-2003): During the early 1970s he contributed to the UK underground press such as the *International Times,* also establishing *Nasty Tales*. Later he wrote for *NME* and was a member of the proto-punk band The Deviants.

[129] Nick Kent (b. 1951): Considered one of the most influental music writers of the 1970s generation, he was a writer for NME and and later The Face. Author of *The Dark Stuff: Selected Writings on Rock Music* (Penguin, 1994), and *Apathy for the Devil: A Seventies Memoir* (Da Capo Press, 2010).

> But with all due respect to my typewriting colleagues, Linton's the only writer I can think of whose redefined a music, jumped out of the audience onto the stage and slashed the backdrop behind the archetype Jah-chanting rootsical dreadlocks bands to shreds with two disco mixes 'All Wi Doin' Is Defendin', 'It Dread Inna Inglan,' and one album, *Dread Beat an' Blood* (all available through Virgin's Front Line) (Goldman, *Sounds*, 1978).

Goldman compliments Johnson for being a writer 'whose redefined a music'. An examination of this subcultural reception helps us to reconsider in a fundamental way whether 'performance poet' is the right term to apply to Johnson's work? Alternatively, should we consider seeing him more as a conventional writer and critic, who additionally practices performance? We can infer from the above quotation that Johnson was seen in association with the rise of 1970s British rock criticism, a period when popular music journalism was increasingly gaining more artistic status and autonomy, and star writers with 'gonzo' qualities propelled the punk fanzine culture forward. In this cultural climate, it made sense to see Johnson as a printed poet who had turned to music.

These observations are strengthened by the tone and focus of the interview as a whole. Goldman describes her first impression of Johnson:

> The brisk, alert man sitting behind the library desk looks like a secondary school teacher – fawn slacks, blue V-neck jumper, red/green/black (*not* red/green/gold, this means Africa, not Rasta) tam – is The Poet. His words in conversation are crisp, factual, almost academic; his singing is anguished bellows and ominous chants, in English patois writing, a poetic extension of the experimental work first book of poetry *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (Goldman, 1978).

Identifying him as a secondary school teacher and calling him 'The Poet' creates an image of a rather 'bookish' figure – a writer in an almost stereotypical sense, wearing the typical slacks and V-neck. This image also coincides with Goldman's description of his words as 'almost academic'. Reminding the reader of his publications, she firmly places him in a literary and academic context, even though the interview is conducted for a music publication: 'Linton is one of the more sophisticated interviewees I've dealt with; blatantly verbal, his control of his own dialogue is immaculate as befits an experienced radio interviewer' (Goldman, 1978). He is rendered as a professional journalist, writer and critic, rather than a representative of tabloid ideas of frenzied impulse and creativity straight from

‘the ghetto’. In another review in *Record Mirror* in September 1978, by Tim Lott,[130] the emphasis on Johnson’s studious aura reappears:

> Mild mannered and bespectacled. Linton Kwesi Johnson is more reminiscent of a librarian than an angry man with a bitter vision. Linton – Poet of poet and the Roots – does in fact work in a library. But his polite manner and cool academic aura are belied by his poetry, anthems of war and bile (Lott, 1978, 17).

Yet again, the ‘librarian’ image is introduced in this description of Johnson, the journalist emphasising that he ‘does in fact work in a library’. Would this librarian image be so emphasised for a white and middle class poet? Was a young, black, working class intellectual something genuinely considered unusual, or were the journalists reacting, on the contrary, to what they saw as an unbalanced or unfair representation of black men at the time? Or maybe few poets or literary figures were interviewed in music magazines, so his academic persona simply sets him apart from the musicians that were normally featured?

With these questions in mind, during the 1970s and early ‘80s, as a 1984 article in *Pulse!* demonstrates, Johnson built a reputation as something close to a *reggae scholar*:

> One of the many things Linton Johnson did during the long break between albums was the research for a ten part BBC radio series on the history of reggae entitled *From Mento To Lover’s Rock*. Linton again returned to Jamaica in November 1982 for background on the project, which only enhanced Linton’s reputation as one of the world’s most learned scholars of reggae and where it came from (Wendt, 1984, 14).

The BBC Radio 1 ten-part documentary series *From Mento to Lover’s Rock*, first aired in 1982 and narrated by Johnson, illustrates how he was in many ways a mediator of reggae to a British audience. In the documentary, he takes the listener on a pedagogical journey through the history of Jamaican music. As such, Johnson’s image as a reggae spokesperson was moulded by the British context in which he could inhabit a more detached critical position. As a Jamaican-born Black British man who had grown up in Brixton, he could evaluate Jamaican culture with critical distance, while at the same time knowing the culture well enough to function as its ambassador. This critical distance, as well as his deep knowledge of

[130] Tim Lott (b. 1956): British Journalist and novelist, author of *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1996), *White City Blues* (1999), whose most recent novel is *Under the Same Stars* (2012).

Jamaican culture, becomes clear in Johnson's own journalistic endeavours, especially in an interview with the singer Janet Kay in 1979, where Johnson brings in a rare gendered perspective:

> The dominance of males in the music industry is perhaps more pronounced in Jamaica than elsewhere. The predominance of rastas in the creation of music there largely accounts for the small output of records by Jamaican female vocalists. For according to the Rastafarian worldview, woman is under man and man over woman. In Britain, however, a somewhat different situation is obtained. Here, our female reggae singers are holding their own against the males (Johnson, 1979, 16).

He analyses Jamaican reggae's gender politics from a British perspective, drawing out an ideological difference between Jamaican reggae and British reggae in the phrase 'our female reggae singers'. He situates himself outside of the Jamaican gender discourse, and clearly approaches it from the outside, where he can be critical of some of its dogmas. Overall, the title *From Mento to Lover's Rock* affirms the multifaceted relationship between Jamaican and British reggae. Mento is the folk music of Jamaica, while Lover's Rock is a romantic, softer, and more pop-inspired style of reggae that was predominantly created in Britain, and that reached a bigger audience there (Barrow and Dalton, 2007). The title 'From Mento to Lover's Rock' shows that the late 1970s and early 1980s represented a period where reggae was increasingly finding its own British expressions. Johnson was not only influential as a reggae artist performing British reggae, but he was also central in conceptualising and narrating these differences and changes as a reggae critic.

2.4.3 The Rude Boy

Considering this 'bookish' image created of Johnson in the Goldman interview in 1978, Johnson himself behaves in a way that invites an academic label or affiliation. Yet, when asked about his time studying sociology at Goldsmiths College, he responds in a dismissive manner: 'it's a waste of time! It's a real wank! So abstract, so far removed from reality' (Goldman, 1978). He wants to distance himself from *mainstream* academia, while still being taken seriously as an intellectual. This resistance successfully enhanced his place in the

subcultures with which Goldman associated him. By calling academia ‘wank’, he exhibited a disregard for bourgeoisie politeness and standards in a way that has something in common with interviews and statements by punk bands like the Sex Pistols. Johnson seemed to be able to combine an intellectual ‘librarian’ and scholarly image with a more rebellious and anti-establishment Jamaican ‘rude boy’ demeanour.

According to the curators of the exhibition ‘Return of the rude boy’ at Somerset House in the summer of 2014, a ‘rude boy’ can be defined in the following terms:

> Originating from the streets of Kingston, Jamaica in the late 1950s, Rudeboy or Rudie came to represent the young rebels who wore distinctively sharp sartorial styles such as Mohair suits, thin ties and pork pie hats. The style was closely connected to the music movements of the time; their initial inspiration derived from American Jazz and R&B musicians as well as some notorious gangsters (Exhibiton text available in print and online).[131]

In interviews, Johnson displays a rebellious attitude that helps to fashion his rude boy style. There is an interesting moment in the interview with Goldman when Johnson starts to reminisce about his old Saturday job at a discount tailors called Lew Rose:

> I used to dress real *slick* in them times, black Tonik 3 ply jacket, double breasted blazer, brass buttons, fawn tonic trousers, brogues from Brewer Street – know what I mean? Braces, and – what's the name of those shirts?" Dennis Morris is sprawled in a library chair, collapsing in laughter at the fashion-plate recollections – "Ben Shermans!" "Yeah, in them days I was a real flash salesman in Oxford Street, 'Good *afternoon* sir – nice bit of Tonik?'" (Goldman, 1978).

The remarks about his past are made humorously and the story is intended to be funny for more than one reason. To a certain degree, he makes fun of the stereotype of a typical English gentleman. However, the anecdote is primarily amusing to Johnson because, first, it reveals his own vanity, and, second, because his vanity fits perfectly into the way young Jamaicans and reggae fans dressed at that time. The ‘sharp’ tailored look is characteristic of classic English men’s clothing, but this sartorial style was eventually appropriated and reinvented by Jamaican rude boys in the 1960s. This tailored look would consequently have a strong place in reggae culture. By telling this story, Johnson reminds the reader, perhaps deliberately, that

[131] Online source: https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/visual-arts/return-of-the-rudeboy [09.05.17, 00.27].

he is a part of a reggae subculture, and that he is hip and in-the-know about what is cool within that scene.

Moreover, the story indicates that questions concerning 'Englishness' are not completely removed from the subject of reggae subcultures. Living in Britain clearly shaped Johnson's relationship with reggae, but we need to remember that Jamaican reggae had already appropriated cultural signifiers from England and made them their own.[132] Looking English or even resembling a librarian had an extra-dimension: these were common mainstream cultural signifiers for English archetypes that were invested with new meanings in a reggae subcultural context. The elements of his image that could immediately seem the most British to some were also amusingly the same factors that enhanced his rude boy style. The signature trilby that he wears in many photographs is another indicator of rude boy flair and of classic English sartorial sophistication. The ambiguity of these cultural signifiers contributes to the construction of Johnson's image, and allows him to embody different identities: the Jamaican rude boy, and the intellectual that plays with connotations of English gentleman's clothing. The story about Lew Rose demonstrates the extent to which Johnson's *oeuvre* is interspersed with a web of influences – on both the textual and contextual level.

This chapter has looked at the ways in which Johnson's poetry is shaped by his interaction with the alternative music press and with British subcultures in the 1970s and early 1980s. Johnson was at the time seen as a persona that embodied the intersection between the hipster and the black radical. He was furthermore seen as a critic, a librarian-like intellectual and a reggae scholar, and his image was fashioned through his relationship with other British punk and new wave musicians and journalists during this period. Looking at his coverage in the alternative music press also demonstrates the importance of his iconic rude boy style in the construction of his unique public image, which once again accentuates the

[132] The Clarks desert boots and wallabees are an example of something quintessentially English that has become quintessentially Jamaican, and particularly reggae-style, in another subcultural context (Fingers, 2012).

subcultural nature of his status and influences. The chapter has, through reading his poetry in this British context, established that Johnson was instrumental in introducing the Black British experience, via a punk- and new wave-inspired Caribbean DIY poetics, into the subject-matter of dub poetry at a time when reggae made in Britain by Black British artists was struggling not to be a poor imitation of Jamaican reggae. His poetry experiments with a Black British and multicultural social realist expression, DIY, and a confrontational rhetoric that is shaped by, and has in turn helped to shape, some central tendencies in British pop lyricism and performance based poetry in the post-war period.

It is worth considering the probability that Johnson's poetry is, among other things, the expression of an experimentation with a form of 'black new wave': an aesthetic rooted in reggae music, and a Caribbean literary tradition that places emphasis on challenging the English canon's ideals of 'tap-natch' poetry, but that simultaneously participates in a creative scopic exchange with British punk and new-wave movements. The exploratory and open nature of this reading highlights the ongoing need to further conceptualise, think through, and develop a critical language that can help to categorise and label the unnoticed links, themes, tropes, and aesthetic tendencies in post-war British poetry that run across the categories of Black British and 'white British' writing. Johnson's poetry highlights the stylistic connections, networks, and political allegiances that we fail to see or understand if we 'ghettoise' Black British writing, or only draw comparisons with other black diasporic expressions from around the world, while neglecting 'white' or multicultural cultural forms that are stylisticially, culturally, and politically closer and more relevant to our object of study.

Johnson's poetry carves a new path that shapes British reggae as a relatively autonomous form of reggae independent of Jamaica, and does so by drawing on influences from punk and new wave. The link to British subcultures helps to form new patterns and

directions in Johnson's exploration of a Caribbean aesthetic that he develops from his Caribbean predecessors: 'creatin new links/ linkin/ blood risin surely/ carvin a new path/ movin fahwod to freedom' (Linton Kwesi Johnson, 2011,22). Johnson engages with the ideas of the Caribbean literary canon, particularly its interest in the authentic and honest representation of Caribbean perceptual models and voices. Yet, his inclusive understanding of Caribbean aesthetics that emphasises honesty and authenticity also allows him to explore important new connections and relationships beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean. These; connections that allowed him to make meaningful contributions to urban cultural life in Britain as both a poet and a performer. Johnson's interaction with the punk movement ultimately demonstrates his belief that dub poetry contains a message about black and Caribbean struggle that can cross national and racial boundaries, and that is simultaneously particular and universal in nature. To this belief, and this message, the next chapter turns.

3. Bass Culture: Dub and the Universal Sufferer

> 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 (Johnson, 1976, 399).

> Stop di ism and skism/ Fe we time, children, fe we time/ this a sufferer's time (The Heptones, 'Sufferers Time', 1976). [133]

> **[…]** for he knows that negro blood has a message for the world (Du Bois, 2015, 5) [1903].

This third and final chapter of the thesis discusses the ways in which Johnson's poetry responds to and incorporates the aesthetic and political ideals of Jamaican dub music as a cultural form and belief system, in its own right, relatively detached from the Caribbean and Black British literary, scholarly, and journalistic networks discussed in the previous chapters.[134] It explores how Johnson integrates, while also adjusting, the political and artistic energies of a largely non-verbal, sensuous instrumental music into written form, as well as its lyrical and thematic diversity (Veal, 2007; Henriques, 2011; Katz, 2003; 2000).[135] Moreover, it unpacks the ways in which the poems often absorb the beliefs of dub musicians and producers, and how dub assimilates a subset of Johnson's other cultural influences. These influences include the mysticism of Rastafari, African American humanism, and the utopian impulses of black Atlantic music.

In what follows, I argue that Johnson's poetry, inspired by reggae and dub music, fluctuates between a *committed* identity politics and a more universalist aestheticism (Sartre,

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[133] The Heptones, 'Sufferers Time' (1976). Written by Lee Perry and released on the label Upsetters. Transcription.

[134] I use the terms 'dub' and 'reggae' interchangeably throughout. My main emphasis, however, is on how Johnson responds to dub as a sub-genre of reggae music that centrers bass and rhythm, whether accompanied by vocals or not.

[135] 'The Bass and Drum is the key to any music, and the rest of the stuff is just spice' (Fully Fullwood in Katz, 2003, 163).

1988).[136] Johnson's poetry famously portrays the importance of reggae music to Afro-Caribbean people and to the Black British community in England. Yet, as my exploration of his punk reception in the previous chapter demonstrates, his poetry and promotion of reggae culture have reached out to both black and white audiences. Branching out from my archival research into his diverse, in particular multiracial, audiences in the UK, I argue through a series of readings that Johnson, inspired by the aesthetics and politics of reggae, sets up a generative and productive relationship between specifically black community struggle and the universal experience of 'sufferation'. As indicated in the epigraph, he has professed that the 'sufferah' or 'all sufferers' share a collective experience. Such a statement reveals his belief in the ability of music and poetry to speak to the universal human condition. At the same time, nonetheless, through his involvement and activism with the magazine *Race and Class*, as well as by mainly portraying black communities in Britain, he has indicated that race and class determines our experiences, privileges, and opportunities. Although Johnson's simultaneous emphasis on the universal experience of suffering and identity politics might seem like a paradox, and indeed functions as one in some instances, it also makes a consistent claim about black aesthetics; namely, that a universal conception of humanity can be accessed through the prism of black experiences and art forms.

This chapter's argument is rooted in close readings. They begin by examining how Johnson's poetry conveys the immediate sensory experience of dub, and how he ties this experience to Jamaican politics. I also discuss how Johnson challenges more generally the difference between disinterested aestheticism and active political intervention by blurring the difference between real and symbolic violence. I will then explore how Johnson's poetry

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[136] When I use the term 'aestheticism' here, rather than simply 'aesthetics', I am referring to art that is predominantly occupied with what Harold Bloom calls 'the autonomy of the aesthetic' rather than art as an expression of ideology or philosophy (Bloom, 1994, 10). I employ it to address those aspects of Johnson's poetry, inspired by rastafari mysticism, which could be seen as primarily, yet not exclusively, engaged with viewing reggae music and poetry as offering insight into the human condition without any overt ideological underpinning.

engages in a polemical and relatively aggressive identity politics wherein issues of gender and class, in addition to race, are given crucial significance. Gender, in particular, I will argue, highlights the poetry's more essentialist aspects. Finally, I discuss how the poetry ultimately universalises the Afro-Caribbean struggle by anticipating and prophesying future redemption for 'the sufferer'.

Demonstrating the complex relationship between particularity and universality in Johnson's work, Kei Miller argues that the strength of Johnson's poetry lies in its ability to give voice to his present while 'he is careful to locate his poetry in a particular time and place'. He argues further that the poem, 'Inglan is a Bitch',

> is not autobiographical; Johnson is speaking for a larger human condition. The persona is imagined literally inside the belly of the beast – working on the underground, and despite the circularity of the work, he still does not know his way 'around' London' (Miller, 2013).

As Miller observes, Johnson's poetry negotiates revolutionary sentiments expressed on behalf of the Black British community and a more universalist aesthetic in which both the speaker and reader are identified, first and foremost, as human. This duality, I contend, and the constant negotiation between black identity politics and a universalist aesthetic, is a central characteristic of dub poetry as a *genre.* By comparing Johnson's work to that of his contemporaries and those influenced by his work, such as dub poets Michael Smith and Jean 'Binta' Breeze, it becomes evident that many of the genre's core thematic and formal concerns are deeply engaged with this dialectic between identity politics and an awareness that the experience of suffering and pain is a fundamental component of what it means to be human in an unjust and unequal world.

Johnson has distanced himself from the dangers of political withdrawal, passiveness, and complacency sometimes associated with Rastafari culture. Indeed, he has been active in left-wing magazines and political movements such as *Race Today*, *Race and Class*, the British Black Panther Movement, and Creation for Liberation (Caesar, 1996, 68; Goldman, 1978). Despite this emphasis on political involvement, however, the mystic and more passive

aspects of Rastafari culture has nonetheless seeped into his poetry via dub. By introducing the neologism 'bass culture', which amalgamates the aesthetic and the political, Johnson also explores the elusive and disinterested sensory – yet also rebellious and political – undertow of reggae music. This merging of perspectives, however, does not remove Rastafari culture's three distinct dimensions – the politically committed, the politically disinterested, and the amalgamation of these two – from Johnson's work. As will become evident, he in fact *oscillates* between them, weighs them differently against each other at different times in his career, and sometimes even within the structure of a single poem.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to bring attention to a productive tension that appears throughout the whole of Johnson's *oeuvre*, one that has been negotiated at each stage of this thesis. Johnson wishes both to give voice to the Caribbean and Black British experience, while also speaking beyond these categories to create new aesthetic-political communities. Johnson's term 'bass culture', which I argue is one of his most substantial conceptual contributions to ongoing discussions about a Caribbean aesthetic, synthesises his Black British identity politics with his poetic inclination toward universalist and mystic belief systems that are inspired by dub and reggae music. Johnson's poetry develops bass culture out of Jamaican reggae culture, but shifts it away from a culture defined by nationality, but rather by bass; that is, by aesthetic experience. Pointing to the far-reaching inclusivity of Caribbean aesthetics, Mykaell Riley understands bass culture as the result of an expansive and broadened understanding of a Jamaican musical genealogy:

> Bass culture encompasses but is not limited to sound systems, ska, roots reggae, dub, pop reggae, jungle, drum and bass, trip-hop, garage, 2 step, grime, dubstep and a host of other genres and sub-genres. The term has evolved to transcend any individual style. Bass culture can be continually refined as a term, considered a catalyst in new sub-genres, and as a creative bridge across successive generations (Riley, 2014, 102).

Bass culture, as Riley describes it, 'transcends' established stylistic categories and is continually being redefined.[137] By also highlighting its cross-generational bridging, he

[137] See also Paul Sullivan's *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora* (Sullivan, 2014).

renders bass culture as a term which makes Jamaican culture a radically open category transcending national, generational, and stylistic boundaries. Yet, crucially, it is still perceived as having a Jamaican identity at root. Bass culture can therefore be described as an expression of *both* Jamaican roots and routes (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990). What is more, it offers a third term to be considered alongside 'Caribbean aesthetics', discussed in chapter one, and the creolised 'British reggae' aesthetic, explored in chapter two. Bass culture is both Jamaican culture and British culture, but it is *also* something in its own right that transcends these two categories, a universalising culture that contains the possibility of new international aesthetic-political communities; that is, musical or poetic communities that are political. Through this threefold prism provided by the concept of bass culture, the chapter additionally addresses how Johnson's poetry builds on core features of a Caribbean aesthetic, as discussed in the first and second chapters: the belief that finding authentic Caribbean perceptual models is a necessary starting point before poetry is able to say something about the world at large. I propose that bass culture can therefore be described as Jamaican culture, though renamed and redefined as a utopian and universally inclusive conceptual unit.

3.1 Reggae's Politics: Aestheticism and Political Commitment

Before outlining the trajectory of the chapter in more detail, I want first to introduce the theoretical frameworks that I argue help us to nuance and clarify the kinds of politics that dub and reggae represents in Johnson's poetry. This part of the chapter has a twofold structure. First, I will discuss how the modernist aesthetics of Theodor Adorno and the contemporary aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière can further the chapter's terminological clarification. Second, I will briefly introduce the ways in which African American literature, especially the writing of W.E.B Du Bois on the topic of the negro spiritual, provides frameworks to

understand how Johnson's interest in the relationship between aesthetics and politics participates in a black Atlantic aesthetic tradition.

A key component of reggae's politics is its utopian vision of the possibility of future justice for the oppressed. This is seen as an ideal that can realistically be achieved, but which is not yet obtained. In dub poetry, the Afro-Jamaican historical struggle is often universalised and made into *the* prime example of human suffering and struggle for liberation. As the introduction argued, the influence of reggae music on Johnson's work has often been interpreted through macro-ideological frameworks focused on socialist slogans and subversions of Western standards and norms (Habekost,1993; Merriman, 2012). Although these interpretations are to an extent accurate, their configuration of the political rhetoric that reggae artists tend to use needs further nuancing. This discrepancy becomes especially evident when we step back from the academic analysis and return to the primary sources: reggae lyricism and interviews with musicians. It is true, of course, that reggae artists often reject Western norms, or what they call 'Babylon'. Yet, this rejection also includes a rebuttal of traditional Western political solutions and alternatives. The reggae belief system often rejects, or negates in other ways, active political involvement. Party politics is what countless reggae singers, Bob Marley among them, have referred to as 'politricks' (Toynbee, 2007, 178). Reggae lyricism is often sceptical of 'ism and skism', as The Heptones quotation in this chapter's epigraph suggests. In addition to participating in an explicit and straightforward left-wing and anti-Western discourse, reggae music also participates in an understated, sensory, and spiritual act of resistance. These aspects of reggae music that surface in Johnson's poetry particularly shares features in common with those aspects of modernism that explore the limits of language, as I discuss in more detail when looking at how Johnson's

poetry aspires towards the impact of music (Veal, 2007, 205).[138] It is crucial to our understandings of Johnson's poetry, and his politics, that we recognise these two aspects of his writing, and how he combines them.

When discussing the often subtle differences between these two dimensions of reggae's politics – the seemingly politically withdrawn and the politically engaged – the aesthetic theories of Theodore Adorno and Jacques Rancière allow for a fuller understanding of these complex, and sometimes contradictory set of interactions. These are two generationally and politically different theorists, Adorno belonging to the Frankfurt School, Rancière a student of Louis Althusser – though crucially, he departs from Althusser's understanding of the proletariat as a group that needs to be led and organised by intellectuals (Rancière, 2004). However, the continuity between their theories is that they question common-sense assumptions about what we view as politically engaged literature and what we judge to be apolitical, autonomous literature, or 'art for art's sake'. Both reject the notion that political art is necessarily what Jean Paul Sartre describes as *engagé* or 'committed' (Sartre, 1988, 23; Howells, 1979, 14). Anti-totalitarianism is also a strong component of both theories, which resonates with reggae's rejection of 'ism and schism' and deep skepticism towards organised politics. Though a detailed exposition of these extensive theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, there are two perspectives which I believe can help to clarify reggae's role as a political force in Johnson's work. The first of these is Rancière's argument that the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous art does not determine whether

[138] The relationship between secular Jewish philosophy and the role of aesthetic communication in black Atlantic music is a key point made by Paul Gilroy in his chapter, 'Not a Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime', in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Gilroy, 1993, 188–223). It is worth noting that Gilroy openly acknowledges the influence of both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on his understanding of black Atlantic music and culture. This shows that the comparison that I am making between Adorno and Johnson's more oblique politics of reggae could be seen as applying and providing a concrete example of how this similarity might surface in poetry. However, my reading differs from Gilroy's by claiming that it is primarily the secular, yet mystic-inspired, rhetoric they have common, while their understanding of what constitutes political resistance in the arts are different.

an art work is political or not; second is the elevated position art inhabits as a substitute for religion in Adorno's secular ideals for modernist art.

Adorno is a renowned opponent of popular music and what he calls 'the culture industry' (Adorno, 1991). Unlike Rancière, who argues that the distinction between heteronomous and autonomous art is irrelevant with regards to determining the political (Rancière, 2009, 32), Adorno contends that it is only autonomous art that negates society that can offer a genuine political critique (Adorno, 2013; Hohendahl, 2013, 157). Because Adorno rejects the idea that politically engaged or committed art can offer real political resistance, his view does not help us to understand why Johnson believes in the political potential of *both* committed and autonomous expressions, that he fluctuates between, and on occasion merges them.

Rancière, who does not create a hierarchy between these two kinds of art, helps us to understand why both these two forms, the committed and the seemingly 'pure' and politically disinterested (autonomous), can exist simultaneously and without contradiction in Johnson's politics. Rancière argues that if we shift the focus from what he calls the 'representative regime' to the 'aesthetic regime' of art, which refers to views that emphasise the sensory rather than the representational dimension of art works, then the distinction between art and non-art, or art for art's sake and politically engaged art, becomes insignificant (Rancière, 2009, 13; Rancière, 2004).

However, despite reggae's departure from Adorno's core premises about the culture industry and autonomous art, Adorno can help to explain the semi-religious and theological facet of reggae which Johnson's poetry incorporates, and which originates from Rastafari culture and the utopian tradition in black Atlantic music more generally (Gilroy, 1993, 36–37). As we will see, reggae integrates Rastafari's and black Atlantic music's emphasis on the *possibility* of an alternative world being revealed or evoked in fragmented moments through

music, even though we presently live in Babylon: 'I trod di day/ all di way/ an ride di nite/ movin sway/ searchin lite' (Johnson, 2006, 20). Although Adorno does not believe that art offers redemption or solution, he does believe that by negating the ideal, it conjures the possibility of an alternative future through contemporary society's 'rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light' (Adorno, 1974, 247).

The relationship between aesthetics and *negative theology*, or quasi-religious symbolism, tendencies of which can be found in Adorno, has been recurrent preoccupation of philosophy since Classical Greece, perhaps most strikingly in the writing of Plotinus (204/5–270 AD), who also emphasised the importance of light to truth and beauty (Beardsley, 1975, 78). Negative theology can be defined as a kind of theology that sees God as a form of absence, rather than a presence or revelation (Tereszewski, 2013, 66). What I want to emphasise through this comparison of the mystic and spiritual elements of Johnson's poetry and the writings of Adorno on aesthetics and literature, however, is that secular post-war poetry and literary criticism committed to the transformative nature of the aesthetic in an elevated artistic realm has often been drawn to a religious or quasi-religious rhetoric. Although Johnson is not personally religious (Caesar, 1996), his secular aesthetic often uses religious-sounding metaphors. In *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (2006), Robert Beckford argues that the aesthetics of reggae music is deeply influenced by what he calls 'black theology', suggesting that the church and the dancehall constitute the two central institutions of Afro-Caribbean life (Beckford, 2006). As if to substantiate Beckford's claims, Johnson's poetry demonstrates that black theology and Rastafari mysticism is relevant to reggae's aesthetics, including its secular incarnations. Indeed, he has referred to Bob Marley's 'So Jah Seh' as a 'secular hymn' (Johnson, 1976, 406). It is also worth noting here that Johnson has commented that the Old Testament was one of his principal literary influences when he starting writing as a teenager. Of particular impact was *Ecclesiastes*, one

of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible, which he has mentioned in more than one interview (Caesar, 1996, 65; Morris, 1989).

If we additionally consider the impact of Rastafari, a spiritual movement which largely appropriates and 'Africanises' the Old Testament, taking the word 'Jah' from the Hebrew 'Yahweh' (Edmonds, 2012, 35), then it is imperative to recognise that reggae music has mystic and negative elements that are shared with modernist aesthetics. Marcin Tereszewski illustrates the often gradual transition from aestheticism to mysticism in modernist aesthetics by discussing the relevance of negative theology to Samuel Beckett's writing (Tereszewski, 2013). Colleen Jaurretche's *The Sensual Philosophy: Joyce and the Aesthetics of Mysticism* draws similar links by discussing the relationship between modernist aesthetics and the medieval mystic tradition (Jaurretche, 1993, 41). Johnson's emphasis on music, the sound system's sensuality, and the verbally inexpressible dimensions of dub, also recalls the late-modernist interest in sensuous richness and metaphysical elements expressed in the work of such poets as Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane and Derek Walcott (Ragg, 2010; Munro, 2015; Burnett, 2000). In this way, Johnson's incorporation of the belief system of dub and reggae corresponds to his assimilation of modernist elements, as well as the utopian and humanist aspects of African American literature. I will therefore briefly outline the features Johnson shares with the latter, before demonstrating this connection through close readings in the last section of the chapter where I discuss Johnson's utopian sentiments and his tendency to universalise black struggle. This comparison is intended to counter Laurence Breiner's claim in *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*: 'It is indicative that (North) American music has affected Jamaican music, but not particularly the dub poetry which is otherwise so closely associated with the music' (Breiner, 1998, 201).

Johnson writes in 'Jamaican Rebel Music', a piece of criticism that underpins the argument in this chapter, that reggae encompasses both an aesthetic mysticism *and* an active and physical political involvement:

> the historical experience of the Afro-Jamaican is a deeply spiritual experience, a religious experience in the wildest sense of the word. The quest for spiritual well-being, this impelling need to be free of the inner pain, the inner tension, the *oscillation* between the psychic states of despair and rebellion does not necessarily oppose the physical quest for liberation (Johnson, 1976, 407, my emphasis).

There is a clear link here between dub poetry's engagement with the ways in which the spiritual and aesthetic experience of music encourages activism to improve the life of the 'sufferer', and W.E.B Du Bois' interest in the negro spiritual's role in African American liberation. 'Negro spirituals' (sometimes simply called 'spirituals') are Christian songs that were created by enslaved African Americans (Lovell, 1986, 14). The connection between Johnson's ideals, taken from reggae, and the African American radical tradition, therefore becomes particularly apparent when we consider his interest in the writing of Du Bois and the New Negro Movement (Morris, 1989). Johnson has stated that 'Du Bois [...] had a tremendous impact on me' (Caesar, 1996, 64). Johnson's thought on the relationship between aesthetics and politics was most likely influenced by this long African American tradition of thinking through the relationship between art, propaganda, and liberation (Hughes, 1926; Du Bois, 1926; Johnson and Johnson, 1979).

Du Bois and Johnson both emphasise the spiritual dimension of 'black music' as a self-consciously aesthetic and political category rooted in the strife of black people. Johnson describes reggae music as a 'hurting black story' (Johnson, 2006, 17). This close relationship between music and the suffering of slavery is particularly central in Du Bois' magnum opus, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In the chapter 'Of the sorrow song', Du Bois describes the negro spiritual as the 'the rhythmic cry of the slave' (Du Bois, 2015, 189). He furthermore describes the negro spirituals as the voice of suffering and sorrow: 'They are the music of an unhappy people, of children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced

longing toward a truer world, of misty wondering and hidden ways' (Du Bois, 2015, 191). Johnson gives an arrestingly similar characterisation of reggae music and poetry: 'Not only does the poetry of Jamaican music lament the suffering of the 'sufferers', he stresses. It also asserts their strength and their 'determination to struggle relentlessly', and it prophesies the coming Armageddon wherein 'only the fittest shall survive' and 'no weak house shall prosper', because 'it dread down a Babylon/ dreaaaad' (Johnson, 1976, 398). Both Johnson and Du Bois emphasise pain, sorrow, and suffering, and the cathartic feeling of empowerment gained through the aesthetic experience of black music and poetry. By emphasising the importance of music's relationship with black historical struggle and slavery, and crucially for this chapter's arguments, also with universal human rights, Johnson writes himself into both a Caribbean and African American aesthetic tradition (Simawe, 2002; Cataliotti, 2007; Reinette, 2012; Gates, 2014).

In addition to recognising Johnson's place in what we may call a black (Atlantic) aesthetic tradition, it is important to stress from the outset that Johnson's poetry also reflects other broader currents in classical poetics. Here I refer especially to the concepts explored in Aristotle's poetics such as *catharsis* and *mimesis* (Aristotle, 1997) [c. 335 BCE]. Johnson, as we will see, sees reggae music as a form of mimesis; a representation of aspects of Jamaican society. Similarly, key to the experience of dub music is the experience of catharsis rooted in experiencing pain and violence in a non-threatening or dangerous way. Although this will not be the primary focus of my discussions, awareness of the typicality of some of his strategies underlies them, if mostly implicitly. As for other poets and critics since antiquity, Johnson is interested in poetry's ability to use the particular and individual to access the universal (Aristotle, 1997; Heath, 1991; Brooks, 1951).[139] More specifically, Johnson uses the black experience, voiced through reggae, as a starting point to say something universal about the

[139] The emphasis on using literature to access the universal is particularly prominent in the tradition of New Criticism. As Cleanth Brooks writes: 'The poet can legitimately step out into the universal only by first going through the narrow door of the particular' (Brooks, 1951, 1).

human experience of pain and redemption. This helps to explain why Johnson resists being labelled a dub poet: 'I'm not a dub poet and I don't want to be classified as one. I leave that to other people. I've always seen myself as a poet full stop' (DiNovella, 2007). Dub poetry, however, is poetry 'full stop', dealing with so-called 'eternal' themes such as hope, love, pain, war, and suffering. By way of conclusion, this chapter will argue that the commonalities with classical poetics are relevant to how we might read, categorise, and periodise Johnson's work in the future, and what might be at stake in the perspectives we choose.

In what follows I will analyse poems like 'Reggae Sounds', 'Bass Culture' and 'Five Nights of Bleeding' to discuss how Johnson's poetry portrays the aesthetic experience of dub music, and the political power of this experience. These poems demonstrate the importance of direct sensory experience through their emphasis on primary and basic feelings evoked by the music, such as pleasure and pain. They are what I call 'dub-focused' poems in that they mostly focus on the individual's *immediate*, relatively a-contextual, and direct experience of Jamaican music, exploring how this experience invites individuals (Jamaican and non-Jamaican) into a Jamaican community. I will argue that by drawing a connection between black music and community in this way, Johnson's poetry offers a black counter narrative to Immanuel Kant's concept of *sensus communis*. In addition. I will examine how Johnson's poetry aspires towards the bodily and physical experience of dub by confusing the difference between metaphors of physical and symbolic violence, and by blurring the difference between physical and symbolic violence itself. Importantly, Johnson also constantly shifts the perspective between the music and the political context.

Thereafter, I will explore how Johnson explores dub in relation to identity politics and the struggles of a set of *specific* oppressed groups. I will start by looking at how a poem like 'New Craas Massakah' explores the place of reggae music in Black British historical trauma and the mobilisation of community action. By comparing his work to other dub poets, I will

then move on to show how dub poetry as a genre explores the importance of race, class and gender. Through these comparisons, I demonstrate that dub often articulates voices that have an explicit social and political positionality.

Finally, I will discuss how Johnson and Michael Smith explore reggae's universalist and utopian message through the use of eschatological language, and by obscuring the distinction between the first and second person perspective. I furthermore show how Johnson's utopian and universalising sentiments – attributes of dub more widely – can be seen as participating in a black aesthetic tradition in which Johnson's reading of Du Bois is particularly relevant. In light of my other readings in the chapter, I will conclude by arguing that dub poetry is characterised by its use of individual, highly localised, and specific black voices, to bring attention to the plight of all those who suffer.

3.2 Bass Culture: Reggae, Politics, and Community

> for di time is nigh
> when passion gather high
> when di beat jus lash
> when di wall mus smash
> an di beat will shif
> as di culture alltah
> when oppression scatah
> Linton Kwesi Johnson (Johnson, 2006, 16).

In this section, I will consider how Johnson's poetry articulates the immediate bodily and sensory aspects of dub, and the political implications of these sensory aspects: how the aesthetic can 'alltah' and 'smash' the status quo. These powerful and violent sounds are seen in the poetry as central weapons against 'the wall', the main symbol of oppression and control. After discussing Johnson's interest in reggae music as a political force in Jamaican society, and how the listener can be invited into a state of heightened political consciousness, I look at how Johnson's poetry attempts to adapt these musical features into a literary form. By mimicking the violent and powerful bodily effects of dub music through his use of

diction, capitalisation, and line breaks, he attempts to both shock and shake the reader to action. Finally, I undertake an extensive reading of the poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding', and try to highlight how the poem amalgamates, and oscillates between, the individual sensory experience of music and the political contexts in which that experience takes place. Therefore, I will argue that the poem provides insight into how Johnson's poetry is shaped by both reggae's social commitment and more disinterested aestheticism, and how these two forms intersect within the structure of a single poem.

Johnson's poetics of violence rejects W.H. Auden's famous quip that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (Auden, 1988, 246) [1939].[140] Yet, Johnson has also stressed that poetry can never replace concrete political action and organisation (Caesar, 1996). There is a productive tension between these two views of poetry in his work, worked out through the complex politics of dub. Though Paul Gilroy does not elaborate on the concrete manifestations of Johnson's politics, he points to their complex and sensory nature by describing the sound-system environment that nurtured Johnson's 'radical phenomenology of liberation' (Gilroy, 2016, 331). Phanuel Antwi describes this simply as the 'phenomenology of dub' (Antwi, 2005, 70). Although these phenomenological formulations are useful, I argue that by emphasising the term 'aesthetics' specifically, used by Johnson himself, allows us to see the connections between his work and the discussions about a Caribbean aesthetic in the first chapter. It also brings attention to how his poetry and critical writing participate in the field of *aesthetic theory*.

The title of Johnson's essay 'Jamaican rebel music' (1976) is instructive because it hones in on music as an important part of the Jamaican struggle, rather than operating simply as a form of escapism. Jamaica has a population of two million people, and has produced over 100,000 individual records from 1965 to 1990, and it might therefore be the country that

[140] For more on the political power of the spoken word and orality see (Furniss, 2004; Foley, 1992; Fulton and Minor, 2012; Furniss and Gunner, 1995).

has released the highest number of records per citizen (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, [1]). It is neither hyperbolic nor romanticising to say that music has an extraordinary position in Jamaican society and life when compared to other societies. By way of contrast, only 70 collections of poetry were written by Jamaicans in the same period, and only 31 of these were published in Jamaica (Dawes, 1999, 77). The disparity makes evident why so many Jamaican poets are inspired by music as much as by literature, and therefore why it is particularly urgent that we pay attention to the lyrical content of the genre.

'Jamaican Rebel Music' is about the political resistance fundamental to reggae music, a resistance even independent of its lyrical content. Social commentary, however, is undoubtedly a vital characteristic of the lyrics Johnson mentions in the article. This focus is not surprising considering that political lyrics were especially prominent in reggae music of the late seventies, when the article was written: 'Over the last decade, the main preoccupation of the lyricist has been the burning social, political and economic issues of the day' (Johnson, 1976, 411). Explicitly political content is a characteristic of 'roots reggae', a kind of reggae detailing the legacies of colonialism, and which is informed by Rastafari culture (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 129). Still, the evolution of reggae music spans a much larger stylistic range, and reggae subgenres from the sixties, like ska and rocksteady, which were often about love or everyday life, are also addressed in the essay. Johnson argue that deejays like Prince Buster and the duo Michigan and Smiley, who covered a wide range of subject including sexuality or 'slackness', should also be considered reggae poets (Morris, 1989, 257). Thus, Johnson acknowledges that there is no limit to the topics covered by reggae.[141]

In accordance with this diversity, Johnson's writing indicates that it is not only the overtly political aspect that defines the rebellious nature of reggae: 'The lyricism of Jamaican music, which is a part of as well as being informed by the wider Jamaican oral tradition,

[141] *Slackness* is Jamaican slang for sexually explicit content.

gives poetic or lyrical expression to what the music expresses' (Johnson, 1976, 405). The lyrics express an experience that is already inherent in the music, as Johnson argues by referring to the writing of Gordon Rohlehr:

> "Each new weight of pressure" in the society, says Rohlehr, "has its corresponding effect on the music, and the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass, the basic rhythm, the inner pulse whose origin is in the confrontation between the despair which history and iniquitous politics inflict, and the rooted strength of the people" (Johnson, 1976, 401).

The formulation 'the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass' captures the essence, I contend, of what Johnson takes to render reggae politically potent.[142] The music is rebellious not just because of the lyrics, but also due to the specific musicality of the music, here represented by the bass. Rohlehr points to the connection between bass and history/culture that we already identified in Johnson's understanding of bass culture: 'di beat will shif/ as di culture alltah' (Johnson, 2006, 16). Johnson and Rohlehr discuss reggae music as something more than information, direct representation, or documentation. Bass and rhythm, and therefore the overriding aesthetic, further our understanding of the Jamaican political landscape.[143]

In the poem 'Bass Culture', a bold connection is made between the individual's aesthetic experience in a specific place and time, on the one hand, and the individual's position in a historically defined Jamaican community, on the other: 'bass history is a moving/ is a hurting black story' (Johnson, 2006, 17). Johnson's use of the double 'is' shows how the poetry often parallels the music and history. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the coupling of bass with culture in the neologism 'bass culture' creates a special relationship between bass as something purely aesthetic, 'autonomous', and abstract, and bass as something historical and political.

[142] For more on the possible African origins of this politics of sensibility, see *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chernoff, 1979). For a more general discussion of the African aesthetic in dub, see Lisa Tomlinson's *The African Jamaican Aesthetic* (Tomlinson, 2017).

[143] 'If you listen to reggae music, you don't need to buy the paper. Reggae music tell you everything wha' happen in Jamaica' (Roy Cousins quoted in Katz, 2003, 233).

The Jamaican dub producer King Jammy calls dub 'raw music', drawing attention to the abstract and 'autonomous' qualities of dub music: 'Dub means raw riddim. Dub jus' mean raw music nuttin' water-down. Version is like your creativeness of the riddim, without voice' (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 202). His emphasis on dub as voiceless points to dub's interest in the inexpressible – what Paul Gilroy calls 'the topos of unsayability produced from the slaves' (Gilroy, 1993, 74). Dub's focus on the limits of language shares traits with the negative and mystic elements of modernism. Yet, these 'autonomous' and mystic traits are interestingly tied to the political and historical struggle of black people, and so demonstrate that Johnson merges ideals of political commitment with aesthetic autonomy. In 'Bass culture', voiceless dub music reflects the experiences of the Jamaican people and is described as 'muzik of blood', 'black reared', and 'pain rooted', and therefore something that links the Jamaican people to their history: 'burstin outta slave shackle' (Johnson, 2006, 15).

Furthermore, Johnson's criticism addresses Jamaica's violent colonial history, and discusses why Jamaican society is so exceptionally violent. He quotes Gordon Rohlehr, who writes, 'When the rhythm goes dread, the whole society *feels* the tension, and why not? After all it was the cruel tension which determined that the beat should go dread in the first place' (Rohlehr in Johnson, 1976, 401, emphasis in original). The fifth (and final) stanza in the poem 'Reggae Sounds' provides another example of Johnson's interest in dub music that reflects the violent history of Jamaica:

> 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 (Johnson, 2006, 17).

The first line repeats the labial plosive sound 'b' six times and creates an impression of the low tones of bass. First, there is an emphasis on the particularity of how bass sounds, through the poem, 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 aesthetic and the historical in the poem. How, then, should the reader understand the relationship between bass and history more specifically; that is, the relationship between what King Jammy calls ‘raw music’ and politics in Johnson’s poems?

Following the Caribbean critics discussed in the first chapter, Johnson believes that dub and reggae are sensory forms that reflect the Caribbean environmental and historical experience. The bass is not a representation of culture in the traditional sense of simply resembling what it attempts to represent (Barthes, 1968). But it can still be seen as mimetic because, according to Johnson, it represents reality in a more expressive capacity. Brathwaite writes in *History of the Voice* that the use of nation language is a form of ‘mimesis’ (Brathwaite, 1984, 31). The term ‘mimesis’ is perhaps the most complex term in the history of literature and aesthetics, but it is one with which Caribbean poets have often had to grapple (Auerbach, 1953; Halliwell, 2002). Brathwaite shows that the question of nation language is political, even as it addresses one of the fundamental questions of poetics: what is the relationship between poetry and the real? This is a question Johnson’s poetry evokes through its use of nation language, but also through its description of bass as historical medium that conveys the violence of Jamaican society. Johnson’s emphasis on feeling and sensory perception in communicating facts about Jamaica also exemplifies the relevance of the Brathwaite’s understanding of Caribbean perceptual models, as discussed in the first chapter (Brathwaite, 1984).

Musicologists disagree about whether music can communicate or transmit emotions from sender to receiver (Juslin, 2005). One of the most notable features of Johnson’s and Rohlehr’s writing is that they do not simply claim that the musician or composer encodes the music with a message that the listener then decodes. Rather, they describe a scenario wherein the social and political landscape seeps into the rhythm and bass irrespective of the intentions

of the musician, and this in turn is transmitted to the listener.[144] Johnson and Rohlehr do not really explain or theorise the correlation between music and society in any detail, but the concept 'bass culture' views music as able not only to communicate emotions, but also social structures and sentiments. It is important to remember that Johnson's emphasis on dub as a vehicle of Afro-Caribbean experience, in the context of his writing about reggae, refers to the postcolonial context of Jamaican music. In Johnson's article, Jamaican society, including its postcolonial context, cannot solely be understood intellectually, logically, or rationally. This is one of the reasons why Johnson writes that *feeling* is important to understanding this history: 'the feel of the music is the feel of their common history' (Johnson, 1976, 398).

Important for this understanding of Johnson's emphasis on dub, the senses, and community, is Clinton Hutton's analysis of the 'sound system as art', in which the sound system configures a specific time and space (Hutton, 2007, 17).[145] It has influenced how Jamaican music is made, but also the form in which people have been able to perceive all music genres. When paying attention to the spatial and temporary aspects of the sound system or dancehall, phenomenological perspectives are particularly useful. Here we are not only speaking of the aesthetic features of reggae music or poetry, but also a phenomenological intervention that extends beyond these genres. Hutton's main argument, however, is that the sound system plays a pivotal role in forging a Jamaican identity and community through 'aestheticism and entertainment'. This argument points to the relationship between aesthetic experience and Afro-Caribbean community, or *sensus communis*, to which I will now turn.

[144] One way to understand the form of aesthetic communication that Johnson and Rohlehr describes is that they not only believe in music's ability to communicate emotions but also that reggae, and the sound-system space in particular, facilitate a more general 'transmission of affect' (Brennan, 2004).
[145] For more on the phenomenology of the sound system, see Julian Henriques and Beatrice Ferrara's, 'The Sounding of Notting Hill Carnival: Music as Space, Place and Territory' (Henriques and Ferrara, 2014).

3.2.1 Dub's *Sensus Communis*

From Johnson's perspective, the experience of bass invites the listener – not defined in terms of race – into a community of listeners:

> I shall say it again: the popular music of Jamaica, the music of the people, is an essentially experiential music, not merely in the sense that the people *experience* the music, but also in the sense that the music is true to the historical experience of the people, that the music reflects the historical experience. It is the *spiritual expression* of the *historical experience* of the Afro-Jamaican. In making the music, the musicians themselves enter a common stream of consciousness, and what they create is an invitation to the listeners to be entered into that consciousness—which is also the consciousness of their people. The feel of the music is the feel of their common history, the burden of their history (Johnson, 1976, 398; emphasis in original).

This notion, that 'the feel of the music is the feel of their common history', is relevant to understanding reggae's role in forming Jamaican diasporic communities. Moreover, Johnson states that the listener, if only in flickers and fragments, can be invited into that experience. He does not claim that the music is true to objective facts or empirical events; he speaks instead of the consciousness of the people, and of the listener being invited to share in that consciousness. This is based on the belief that people from different cultures all share some fundamental human emotions and mental faculties. He also suggests that one cannot understand another culture purely through rational knowledge. In short, Johnson's series of statements all focus on how the individual experiences dub music, and how this experience carries insight into the Jamaican experience, consciousness, and community, configured here as a political entity.

The underlying premise here is that human beings, of all nationalities and races, can share sensory experiences. Such universalist beliefs are often seen as problematic in a postcolonial context because they are associated with Western classical aesthetics, particularly the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Boehmer, 2010; Dutton, 2005; Spivak, 1999). For Kant, aesthetic judgement is a harmonious free play of the imagination and understanding (Kant, 1951, 52). Kant also believes that aesthetic judgments are intersubjective. This means that disinterested aesthetic judgments (*a priori* judgments) are

'subjectively grounded' (Ginsborg, 2014), and therefore he presumes that others will arrive at the same judgement. Kant uses the term 'common sense', or *sensus communis*, to describe how aesthetic judgements can be shared and create consensus among individual subjects: 'It points to a pleasurable mode of communication dominated by neither concept nor law, one for which the aesthetic judgement of taste is paradigmatic' (Caygill, 1995, 115).

For Kant, however, women and Africans, amongst others, were incapable of making disinterested aesthetic judgments. Many have therefore argued that there is a conflict between Kantian concepts of *sensus communis* and the racial and cultural prejudices of Western Enlightenment thought (Gilroy, 1993; Allais, 2015; Valls, 2005; Emory, 2007). Among them we find cultural critic and art historian Larry Shiner:

> Although it is perhaps an exaggeration to call this universalizing strain in writers from Shaftesbury to Schiller 'aesthetic democracy', it is true that social, racial and gender prejudices often stood in tension with a professed belief in a common humanity and aesthetic experience (Shiner, 2001, 151).

According to Shiner, the belief in a common aesthetic experience, which infers a common human nature, is the democratic aspect of Kant's ideas. Shiner however also points to the exclusionary and racist dimensions of Kant's thinking by referering to *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*: 'The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling' (Kant in Shiner, 2001, 139).[146] Black people were not accepted into the category of those considered fully human and therefore were excluded from the *sensus communis*.

As we will see, Johnson, very much inspired by the radical black aesthetic tradition, counters this Kantian aesthetic universalism. In the work of Du Bois and in the reggae tradition, black people are not merely included into the category of human: black people are placed at the centre of what it means to be human. Human nature is not defined as white by

[146] Shiner takes the quote from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Kant, 1960, 110).

default; rather, it is defined through the prism of black experience.[147] Most important here is that although aesthetic universalism has often been associated with racist Enlightenment thought, Du Bois and Johnson demonstrate that there exists a black tradition of aesthetic universalism that centres black lives and black art forms as expressions that enhance democratic humanism.[148]

Reggae's black humanism is split between seeing the black subject, and the human in general, as 'a self': as familiar, knowable, and same; and yet also as 'other', as something unknowable, alien, and strange. The former perhaps plays a more central role in reggae than in certain African American art forms. Lloyd Pratt argues that, after acknowledging that African American writers have helped to shape democratic understandings of the human, we have to ask what *kind* of humanism they conceived. Pratt suggests that 19th-century African American writers promoted a 'stranger humanism' based on the principle that all humans are ultimately unknowable to each other. Humans are *all* strangers to each other, but can be equal in a democracy by being strangers together, or what Pratt calls being-with-strangers (Pratt, 2016, 6). Resonating with chapter one's discussion of Caribbean aesthetics, Pratt also suggests that these ideas anticipated Glissant's views on the ethic aspects of 'opacity' (Pratt, 2016, 2). The notion of a 'stranger humanism' furthers our understanding of those aspects of reggae's humanism that insist that there are *inexpressible* aspects of the Jamaican struggle, or aspects that cannot be accessed in any direct linguistic way, yet which bring attention to the human condition. The concept of Babylon itself describes an existence in exile: a perpetual state of alienation and strangeness. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Johnson's humanism

[147] It might be argued that this is a black-supremacist worldview that replaces a white-supremacist one. However, this would imply a dismissive reading of almost all black action and thinking that has attempted to say that, for there to be equality among the races, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the fact that black lives matter too. Johnson's emphasis on black struggle is ultimately an attempt at speaking against inequality and the creation of hierarchies among people. It does not deny the equal worth or humanity of any other race. In addition, as will become evident, dub poetry is a genre deeply convinced that every voice comes from a specific person with a specific positionality. So the human has to be defined from a particular position.
[148] For more on humanism in African American literature, see *Black American Literature and Humanism* (Miller, 2009).

that construct black arts as an effective vehicle for *knowing* the self and each other, for sameness, recognition, and familiarity. Reggae music centres black experience in such a way that black is not necessarily defined as different: black is the norm that represents the familiar and familial. Could reggae's centring of blackness as sameness rather than difference be a symptom of its origination in a black majority society? I suggest that the historical, demographic, and geographical distance from Pratt's America example explains the differences between the kinds of humanism that reggae represents. Reggae's humanism, which Johnson absorbs, reflects the basic principle of what Du Bois describes as 'double consciousness'. Despite always feeling like a stranger in his own house in New England, Du Bois recalls when he realised that he was different: 'the revelation first burst upon one, all in a day, as it were' (Du Bois, 2015, 4). There was a moment before he experienced estrangement, and we also have to pay attention to this short-lived stage of pre-alienation.

Du Bois does not reject the universal claims of white art. Instead, he rejects the denial of the universal claims of the black arts: 'it is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible, and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world' (Du Bois, 1926, 783). Johnson demonstrates how black artists and intellectuals, Du Bois among them, have seen black arts as an arena in which the drama of human experience is played out and where 'new ideals for the world' are created. Importantly, Du Bois does not simply universalise the heroic aspects of black struggle and beauty, but also describes the ugliness in the world, asking: 'who shall right this well-nigh universal failing?' (Du Bois, 1926, 779). It is not only that white people are guilty of perpetrating oppression and injustice; this injustice highlights the worst aspects of all human nature and collective being. Du Bois views black art and beauty as encouraging a collective accountability without shifting the blame away from the perpetrator, crucially claiming that

black arts will help to lead humanity forward. Similarly, Johnson sees reggae as having a message directed not only to Jamaicans and the black community, but also outwards into the wider world.

3.2.2 Dub as Literature: Putting the Difference between Music and Poetry into Play

> What I found extraordinary about the tune at the time was the baby crying in the background, it was the first time I's heard anything like that. Later on Scratch used cows and broken bottles and all kinds of weird sounds; after that he started putting out Black Ark records, I realised he is a special guy and I began to see him in terms of being like the Salvador Dali of reggae music with a sort of unorthodox approach (Johnson quoted in Katz, 2003, 290–91)

Johnson's reflections on hearing Lee Perry's 'People Funny Boy' in 1968 demonstrates that he sees reggae as an experimental form which confirms and adds to the influence from other avant-garde expressions such as surrealism, alluded to in the quotation, and T.S. Eliot's fragmented 'blues', as discussed in chapter one. If I have so far focused in this chapter on the experience of listening to reggae, and the political implications of this experience, I now turn to the exploration of how poetry, in printed form, integrates features of dub production into literary form and attempts to arouse the physical and sensory impact of dub music.

Dub poetry borrows strategies from dub production, modifying and enhancing them through literary devices such as line breaks, pauses, and gaps. However, there is a clear distinction between dub music and dub poetry, which Johnson has underlined:

> The kind of poetry I was writing, that I am known for, at least, would be written in a way that a poetic idea would come to me as a musical one. The two would be the same thing – a musical idea or a poetic idea. I can't find any better way of putting it. But eventually I found that I was getting closer to the music, and trying to write within the strict parameters of reggae form which is very limiting. You're not conscious of it at the time, but you get drawn closer and closer and closer to the music until in the end what you're doing is basically making reggae songs or composing reggae music (Morris, 1989, 260).

Johnson is reluctant to be thought of as a musician rather than a poet. He plays on the difference between music, literature, and performance without wanting to dissolve these categories. Although he has worked across different media, he therefore has something in common with artistic currents, both classical and modernist, which believe that every media

has specific qualities that cannot be transferred to others (Lessing, 1874 [1767]; Greenberg, 1940). Johnson's interest in music also shows that his engagement with aesthetics is not a concern pertaining especially to literature. Whilst Johnson believes in the singular qualities of literature (Attridge, 2004), he concomitantly does not view literature as somehow 'autonomous' or distinct from aesthetic experiences in general. This recalls what Jacques Rancière describes as the 'aesthetic regime of art':

> The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between the forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art's sake and art in service of politics, museum art and street art. For aesthetic autonomy is not the autonomy of artistic "making" celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience (Rancière, 2009, 32).

Johnson does not see the autonomy and heteronomy of literature as oppositions, but rather explores the play of meaning made possible by literature's inherent relationship with other cultural forms. In fact, he is particularly interested in the act of translating – or crossing over – from one distinct media form to another, exploring the new meanings that are created in these transformations. This would not be possible if his work was a complete melange. To illustrate, I quote here 'Dread Beat an Blood' at length:

> brothers an sisters rocking[149]
> a dread beat pulsing fire   burning
>
> chocolate hour an darkness creeping night
>
> black veiled night is weeping
> electric lights consoling   night
>
> a small hall soaked in smoke
> a house of ganja mist
>
> music blazing sounding thumping fire blood
> brother an sisters rocking stopping rocking
> music breaking out bleeding out thumping out fire   burning[150]
>
> electric hour of the red bulb
> staining the brain with a blood flow
> an a bad bad thing is brewing

[149] There is punctuation at the end of most of the lines in the first edition. We also see this in the other poems in the first edition.
[150] This stanza is typed more compactly in the first edition. There is a full stop and no spacing between 'fire' and 'blood'. 'Burning' is isolated in a fourth line under 'fire'.

> ganja crawling, creeping to the brain
> cold lights hurting breaking hurting
> fire in the head an a dread beat bleeding beating fire   dread
>
> rocks rolling over hearts leaping wild
> rage rising out of the heat an the hurt
> an a fist curled in anger reaches a her
> then flash of a blade from another to a him
> leaps out for a dig of a flesh of a piece of skin
> an blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding (Johnson, 2006, 5).

The words 'burning', 'night', 'blood', 'burning' again, and 'dread' are separated from the rest of the text, and rhetorical pauses precede these five words. This delaying of the last word in a line is reminiscent of the ways in which vocals are often fragmented and chopped in dub production. Although dub is mainly an instrumental genre, one of its most recognizable features is the omitted or fragmented vocals created by the mute and fader controls in the studio (Veal, 2007, 64). In the poem, the reader imagines a pause or a break before the last word. For readers familiar with dub music, however, this pause is filled not by silence, but rather by a beat or a bass line. The gerunds and present participles of 'rocking', 'pulsing', 'creeping', and 'thumping' also create an impression of the beat unfolding or evolving in the poem. As Kwame Dawes writes of the continuity and consistency of the reggae bass and drum pattern: 'the patterns of reggae are often established by silence and not sound. The listener is aware of the rhythm for it has been established early on in the track, and so when it is pulled out, the listener is still hearing it despite what is going on above' (1999, 105). An imagined rhythm continues in the gaps, and the rhythm is therefore not defined only by the verbal in the poem. 'Music blazing sounding thumping fire' also creates an impression of the rhythm continuing in the gap before 'blood'.

However, in the first edition this gap is filled in with a full stop, and there are other gaps and line shifts found in the first edition that are not reproduced in the *Selected Poems* edition. The different editions therefore place these rhythmic effects in different places. In so doing, they show how dub's concept of 'version' shapes the poems. If we consider that dub is a version or a remix, then it is possible to look at the different editions as versions/dubs with

variations. In this sense, the different editions, like Jamaican Creole, exist in a continuum and not in one standardized form (Cassidy and Le Page, 1980). The poem might be said to recreate the feature of layering in dub, where the lyrics appear and disappear, revealing the rhythm to be a separate layer, even if some knowledge of Johnson's live recordings – when these gaps are in fact filled by music – is necessary for such a reading. Nevertheless, the gaps are more visually evident in the printed version of the poem. The poetry is therefore not simply song lyrics written down, or a form that mimics a pre-existing dub composition; it also enhances, produces, and emphasises other aspects of dub not found in its musical renditions.

Importantly, however, dub music is not only a formal strategy that can inspire structural, rhythmic, and typographic features in print. Dub is also contextually defined, as it also references the extensive dub tradition and subculture. Christian Habekost argues that dub has a technical meaning for the music business, '[…] but in Jamaica it has further, far-reaching connotations. Dub, a musical genre in itself, has become a whole movement with many different facets and perspectives' (Habekost, 1993, 53). In the poem, ganja serves as a cultural signifier because of its strong association with dub culture and sound systems. Venues where people go to listen to dub will often be filled with 'ganja mist', and the importance of ganja to dub poetry might be comparable with the role that scholars such as M.H Abrams have suggested of opium in the study of romanticism (Abrams, 1934). Because of the controversial and sensationalist potential of drug use, ganja is often widely associated with reggae culture.

The emphasis on lighting and darkness, in expressions like 'red bulb', 'electric light', 'electric hour', 'black veiled night' and 'darkness creeping', conjures the typical night club experience of a sound-system night. The scene alludes to the familiar night club ambience of UK sound systems such as Jah Shaka, convincingly visualised in Franco Rosso's film,

Babylon, in 1981. Yet, interestingly, this emphasis on darkness and light, which are common metaphors for the battle between good and evil, enhances the poems mystical and spiritual undertones, which are in turn taken from Rastafari. In addition, the emphasis on synthetic red and electric light also enhances the poems subtle modernist features (Armstrong, 1998, 21), and demonstrates that dub often evokes the sensuousness and mysticism of modernism and Rastafari at the same time. As we also saw in Johnson's appropriation of T.S. Eliot, his poetry often confuses our categorisation of different cultural influences and sources. The fragmented and abstract nature of dub makes it able to contain, merge, and enhance modernist features, reggae influences, and African American literary traditions. It also, as I will now explore, allows it to integrate both explicit political commitments and politically disinterested aesthetic elements.

3.2.3 Violence and Frightful form

Violence takes on a multifaceted form in Johnson's writing. He makes violence a rhetorical ideal to which the poetry aspires, and therefore blurs the difference between aesthetic or symbolic violence and real physical violence in the structure of the poems. The constant shift from symbolic violence to actual violence in the poetry suggests that Johnson is open to using both of these strategies as modes of political resistance. Indeed, he has emphasised the central role depictions of violence and suffering play in dub poetry: 'It is a lyricism which laments the human suffering, the terrible torments, the toil, a lyricism whose imagery is that of blood and fire, apocalyptic and dread – images that are really pictures of a brutal existence in the "land of Sodom and Gomorrah"' (Johnson, 1976, 405). The imagery of what Johnson calls 'blood and fire' is prominent in 'Dread Beat an Blood', 'Bass Culture', 'Reggae Sounds', 'Five Nights of Bleeding', and 'All Wi Doin is Defendin'. These poems provide examples of how the words try to express a form of violence, tension, and 'dread'.

In real life, the pain of slavery will always be associated with human suffering: 'And although it is four hundred years hence, the violence of the people's existence persists like a naked light in a house full of dynamite' (Johnson, 1976, 402). Nevertheless, in 'Dread Beat an Blood', pain, as a feeling in general, is translated into pleasurable feelings. Johnson's emphasis on remembering the terror of slavery through forms that also have a pleasurable facet recalls what Paul Gilroy describes as the 'slave sublime' (Gilroy, 1993, 187–223). The title 'Dread Beat an Blood' creates a Jamaican version of the phrase 'blood, sweat and tears'. It refers to hardship, struggle, and strength, and positions the musical 'beat' at the centre of efforts to convey concurrently miserable, admirable, and courageous sentiments. The term conveys a poeticisation and sublimation of the black Jamaicans' hardship and struggle: 'Though it was his sweat, blood, and tears that built Jamaica, he shares no part of it' (Johnson, 1976, 403). In painting the struggle of the downtrodden with an epic tinge, these depictions of black struggle and courageousness also connote, in an understated way, the French version of 'The Internationale' and its demand for the liberation of '*les damnés de la terre'*

The representation of the oppressed and downtrodden in 'The Internationale' inspired the title of Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), a seminal work on the mechanisms of colonial violence. Johnson has stated that Fanon's theory of violence is a major influence on his own ideas about violence (Caesar, 1996, 66). Paul Gilroy points out that Johnson presents 'a sharply Fanonian analysis' by depicting the 'sometimes nihilistic' and violent impulse of the second generation of blacks in Britain (Gilroy, 2010, 21). In 'Jamaican Rebel Music', Johnson places Jamaican reggae music firmly in the context of decolonization in Jamaica: '[…] it is a history characterised by slave uprising and repression' (Johnson, 1976, 404). He sees the violent impulse in dub music as an exorcism of historical violence and oppresion: 'the music evokes what Fanon calls the "emotional sensitivity" of the

oppressed and gives vent to it through dance'. He continues by quoting the following lines from *The Wretched of the Earth* to describe the violent impulse of the dancehall: 'your purpose in coming together is to allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressivity to dissolve in volcanic eruption. Symbolic killings, fantastic rites, imaginary mass murders – all must be brought out' (Fanon in Johnson, 1976, 400).

In 'Dread Beat an Blood', lines like 'A bad bad thing is brewing' and 'ganja crawling' (Johnson, 2006, 6), create a paranoid and hallucinatory atmosphere in the sound system that anticipate impending doom. The final stanza of the poem ends with a violent attack resulting in 'blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding'. The emphasis on blood flow and the volcanic eruption of it are metaphors that tie the Jamaican present to the past: 'the blood has not ceased to gush but continues to flow over. And the brutality is intensified under a different name' (Johnson, 1976, 402). Furthermore, the imagery can be read as a metaphor for the enjoyable musical climax, when the music's violence becomes a powerful force that has the power to move and to destroy the walls and veins that try to contain it. The bass often wavers between being pleasant and painful, emphasising its forceful physical presence.

Music's violent potential thus complicates the difference between good and evil, pleasure and pain. A good song is often called 'wicked' in Jamaican slang. The phrase, 'a bad bad thing is brewing', similarly has an ambiguous meaning where feelings of hurt and gratification merge. The bass usually climaxes at the point where it becomes too loud. Something bad might be about to happen, like paranoia, tinnitus, or a fight breaking out, or the music might be about to reach its highpoint.

Sound systems are notorious for playing extremely loudly. Standing in front of the heap of speakers can be both a pleasurable and a distressing experience. In a 1981 *New Musical Express* review of the legendary sound system operated by Jah Shaka, the journalist

addresses this painful dimension: ‘Some people complain, say Shaka carries too much weight, too much distortion. It’s true it can verge on pain when Shaka shakes a sound by the neck till it gives off its secret. He is an extreme artist’ (Goldman, 1981, 21). There is a fine line between making the bass loud enough to make a pleasurable physical impact and damaging hearing and causing pain. Kant describes the dynamically sublime as fearfulness experienced from a safe distance. It is a form of might that has no power over us: ‘we must see ourselves as safe to be sensible of this inspiring satisfaction’ (Kant, 2000, 77). In dub, this distance is often challenged, as sublimity and danger are finely balanced, the former sometimes tipping over into the latter. Sometimes the bass will feel most pleasurable in your stomach, when your ears have already started to feel discomfort. Thus, the music’s ‘burning’ and ‘bleeding’ also has a positive implication, asserting its power and force.[151]

The phrase ‘frightful form’ that Johnson introduces in the poem ‘Bass Culture’ is central to understanding the link between dub music and dub poetry. It shows how the violence of dub is an aesthetic ideal to which the poetry aspires. In ‘Bass Culture’ the music is described as ‘hattah dan di hites of fire/ livin heat doun volcano core’, ‘latent powah’, and ‘thunda-wise’ (Johnson, 2006, 15). Volcano and thunder are images that make the music a frightening, extreme, and strong natural force: ‘like a frightful form/ like a righteous harm/ giving off wild like is madness’ (Johnson, 2006, 14). Johnson’s emphasis on these natural phenomena dovetails with Kant’s understanding of the sublimity of watching a roaring storm (Kant, 2007, 262). Bass can be a frightful form of experience, but the ‘harm’ it causes has a righteous aspect when it asserts the listener’s strength and endurance. The bass shakes the body, but when dancing, the listener can ‘groove’ with the bass in a controlled manner. Individuals show strength by not being overrun or distressed by the bass, but resist and control it in their rhythmic movements. One could argue that this is the *catharsis* of dub;

[151] In the same *NME* article, the pain’s positive quality is addressed: ‘If Shaka’s sound sticks needles in your ears, it’s like acupuncture stirring the sluggish circulation of the blood’ (Goldman, 1981, 27).

experiencing these feelings before returning home to a safe and quiet bed after a night at the sound system, or simply by closing the book. This also exemplifies the point, made at the beginning of this chapter, that although Johnson's poetry responds to a specific culture like dub, general questions of classical poetics and aesthetics will often lie beneath these conversations.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Johnson and the punk movement share a confrontational and hardened rhetoric. Their interest in rude or foul language as good or aesthetically pleasing parallels dub poetry's blurring of pleasure and pain. The dub tradition's use of words such as 'bad' and 'wicked' to describe things that are good also muddies and subverts the difference between good and bad poetry. Johnson's poems often combine the harmonic and the pleasurable with something disagreeable or over-the-top. A sentence like 'blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding', in the poem 'Dread Beat an Blood', uses alliteration extensively and could be thought of as somewhat excessive. In addition, Johnson markedly uses extreme capitalisation in the poems in the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*, which are largely removed from the *Selected Poems* edition. The poem 'Youth Scene' is the most remarkable case of this modification. The four words 'BRIXTON',' HIP CITY', 'MUSICAL BEAT', and 'WICKED' are *all* capitalised in *Dread Beat and Blood*, while *none* are capitalised in *Selected Poems*. Perhaps these more amplified features have been toned down to appeal to a more mainstream Penguin audience. However, the excessive use of repetition and capitalisation in *Dread Beat and Blood* may demonstrate that the perfectly balanced, moderate, or subtle poem is not necessarily an ideal in dub poetry. To achieve the shock effect and rhetorical violence to which it aspires, it has to use these strategies generously, and some would say disproportionately.

Johnson uses the power and ferocity of his language as a political weapon. In the introduction to the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood* from 1975, the poet Andrew Salkey

describes the relationship between weapons and words in Johnson's poetry: Johnson cuts through abstraction 'with the ease of a hot knife slicing through lard' (Salkey in Johnson, 1975, 7). Salkey's formulation expresses the ideal that words can be a kind of sharp blade, or ammunition. This ideal is also present in Johnson's poems. In 'All Wi Doin is Defendin', Johnson writes about the fight against a semi-military British police unit. He describes the confrontation: 'wi know dem cold like ice wid fear/ an wi is fire!' (Johnson, 2006, 12). If we consider that the beat in 'Dread Beat an Blood' is 'pulsing fire burning', then both the music and the militant people are described as dangerous and frightening fire; that is, forces that have the power to violently change their surroundings and fight 'ice', the static and frozen situation.

Johnson's diction indicates that the words have been chosen to keep the reader on edge, as if the poet wants the poem to cause fright and wariness. Words and phrases like 'bleeding', 'wailing blood', 'dig of a flesh', 'darkness creeping', and 'black veiled night' generate a dark, murky atmosphere. In the sixth stanza of 'Bass Culture', the sudden transition to capital letters and the exclamation mark further create the unmistakable impression that the narrator wants to shake, shock, or frighten the reader: 'SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!/ What a beat!' (Johnson, 2006, 16). This performativity and dramatic change of textual 'volume' and emphasis is similar to how certain isolated elements, especially the bass, are suddenly turned up in a dub. This literary device also appears in the poem 'Double Scank': 'When I site breddah Buzza/ bappin in style/ comin doun FRONT LINE' (Johnson, 2006, 4). The sudden change in 'volume' visually catches the reader's attention, lending words violence, attitude, and power. 'SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!' is also an onomatopoeia that mimics the sound of the reggae offbeat guitar. This is an obvious example of mimesis, where the literary form is made to resemble reggae music. Its capitalisation and loudness is also an example of attempting to create both a visual and

rhythmic shock effect. 'What a beat!' reveals that the loudness and frightfulness are positive qualities, qualities that make the beat enjoyable and that give the poem the desired impact.

If we return to the end of 'Dread Beat an Blood', we see that the bass itself is not only an aggressive aesthetic force; it can also make people commit violent *acts* against each other. This violence too has an ambiguous meaning. Is the interpersonal violence bad or is it 'bad in a good way', like the bass? The poem climaxes in the last stanza:

> rocks rolling over hearts leaping wild,
> rage rising out of the heat an the hurt
> an a fist curled in anger reaches a her
> then flash of a blade from another to a him
> leaps out for a dig of a flesh of a piece of skin
> an blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding (Johnson, 2006, 5).

The rage rises out of the 'heat an the hurt', which are caused or enhanced by the music, as well as by ganja. Initially, the term 'blood bitterness' makes the violent attack appear grim, dangerous, and upsetting. Nonetheless, the attack might also be read as a metaphor for the musical climax, in which case the violence has a positive meaning. Johnson's view of violence becomes especially ambiguous when the difference between aesthetic experience and violent physical confrontation is made unclear, as in this example. In his poetry, violence can be a righteous last resort against the police, but it can also cause gang warfare and madness amongst 'the rebels'.

3.2.4 Five Nights of Bleeding: Aestheticism, Commitment, and Epic

Johnson portrays the bass as unpredictable and anarchic, and the violence can be turned inwards instead of affecting the intended target. One therefore cannot use the rhythm and bass to achieve concrete or pre-decided political outcomes. The bass is, however, seen as having a powerful impact that threatens safe aesthetic distance. It changes how people feel, drives people to move in some way or another, and therefore symbolises the possibility of

political upsurge and rebellion. Disinterested aestheticism and political commitment consequently both have a central role in Johnson's political project, and both strategies are often present in the structure of a single poem, as my reading of 'Five Nights of Bleeding' in the following will convey.

The ambitious length and extensive look on the page gives the poem an epic quality. It starts *in medias res* and the setting covers many geographic locations across time. It also uses heavy repetition and features tragic heroes that succumb to their own internalisation of violent impulses. Richie Robertson writes that, according to neoclassical criticism, 'the subject matter of the epic had to be war' (Robertson, 2009, 17). Johnson's depiction of violence and reference to 'war among the rebels' spread across London's black nightlife arguably fosters a Black British epic imagination, where the struggle of black people in Britain is both historically situated and happening within the timeless and socially secluded space of the sound system.[152] Famous UK sound systems and labels such as Jah Shaka, Aba-Shanti-I, and Trojan Records (named after a truck, but which uses the image of the Trojan warrior as their logo) demonstrate that warrior mythologies have played a central role in dub iconography in the UK. 'Five Nights of Bleeding' consists of six stanzas that all end in a violent attack. Let us consider the poem in its entirety:

madness…madness…
madness tight on the heads of the rebels
the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast
                    broke glass
rituals of blood on the burning
served by a cruel in-fighting
five nights of horror an of bleeding
                    broke glass
cold blades as sharp as the eyes of hate
an the stabbings
it's war amongst the rebels
madness…madness…war.

[152] The epic poem has been particularly prominent in the work of Derek Walcott. This provides another example of how Johnson interacts with core paradigms in the Caribbean canon (Hamner, 1997; Farrel, 1997; Burnet, 2000).

night number one was in brixton[153]
soprano B sound system [154]
was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
coming doun his reggae-reggae wire
it was soun shaking doun your spinal column
a bad music tearing up your flesh
an the rebels them start a fighting
the yout them jus turn wild
it's war amongst the rebels
madness…madness...war.

night number two at shephard's
right up railton road
it was a night named Friday
when everyone was high on brew
or drew a pound or two worth a kally
soun coming doun neville king's music iron
the rythm jus bubbling an back-firing
raging an rising, then suddenly the music cut
steel blade drinking blood in darkness
it's war amongst the rebels
madness …madness…war.

night number three
over the river
right outside the rainbow
inside james brown was screaming soul
outside the rebels were freezing cold
babylonian tyrants descended
pounced on the brothers who were bold
so with a flick
of the wrist
a jab an a stab
the song of blade was sounded
the bile of oppression was vomited
an two policemen wounded
righteous righteous war.

night number four at a blues dance
                a blues dance
two rooms packed an the pressure pushing up
hot. hot heads. ritual of blood in a blues dance
                        broke glass
splintering fire, axes, blades, brain-blast
rebellion rushing doun the wrong road
storm blowing doun the wrong tree
an leroy bleeds near death on the fourth night
                        in a blues dance.

on a black rebellious night
it's war amongst the rebels
madness…madness…war.

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[153] SOFRANO B, BRIXTON, SHEPARD'S, RAILTON ROAD, JAMES BROWN, NEVILLE KING'S, RAINBOW, LEROY, and TELEGRAPH are capitalized in the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*.
[154] Spelled 'sofrano B,' in the first edition. The sound system referred to had two names, and has latterly been known most often as Soprano B.

night number five at the telegraph
vengeance walked through the doors
so slow
so smooth
so tight an ripe an smash!
broke glass
a bottle finds a head
an the shell of the fire-hurt cracks
the victim feels fear
finds hands
holds knife
finds throat
o the stabbing an the bleeding an the blood
it's war amongst the rebels
madness…madness…war (Johnson, 2006, 6–8).

The first stanza sets the tone in the poem with its opening 'madness…madness…/ madness tight on the heads of the rebels' (Johnson, 2006, 6). This emphasis on madness and anarchy recalls Johnson reflections on the Fanonian dancehall, where everything has to be brought out and feelings 'erupt like a hot blast'. Moreover, 'rituals' illustrates that the sound system exorcises demons and thus exemplifies the ritualistic mysticism of dub. 'In fighting' refers to internecine violence. 'Stabbing' reminds us of spears or other weapons of sacrifice and enhances the ritualistic and spiritual element, though knife crime is also more often associated with gang crime in the UK than guns. In this way, the 'stabbing' may also hint towards the prevalence of so-called 'black on black' crime in Britain. Apart from this extremely subtle – and disputable – cultural marker, the stanza focuses on the music and atmosphere of the sound system without a clear orientation in time or place.

Whereas the time and location are obscured in the first stanza, in the second stanza Johnson here brings the poem back to a very concrete historical and geographical context. It describes 'night number one' in Brixton and mentions the historical sound system Soprano B. This demonstrates how Johnson oscillates between a very specific Black British historical context and a decontextualized depiction of the phenomenological, aesthetic, and ritualistic elements of dub music. There are elements in the first stanza that point to the UK, but these codes are inconspicuous and could easily be interpreted into other cultural frameworks. In

this second stanza, by contrast, reggae is explicitly mentioned, which again enhances the cultural specificity of the scene. The musical climax leads to the eruption of violence, but we do not know whom it involves. Even so, that one can feel the sound 'shaking doun your spinal column' and 'A bad music tearing up your flesh' communicates how the bass violating virtually attacks the listener's organs.

'Night number two' also gives a specific geographical location and names a historical sound system, Neville King's Music Iron. Johnson still lives in Railton Road, the street that runs between Herne Hill and Brixton in London. The local and cultural cartography is therefore very realistic. The drunk people high on brew give the stanza a festive atmosphere, which contrasts with the violence towards the end of the poem. By putting violence and 'raging' into this relatively light-hearted scene, Johnson again brings attention to the multifaceted nature of violence. Violence can be pain, danger, and death, and it can also be the result of celebration, affirmation, and exuberance. However, the violence in the poem only erupts properly when the music is cut. When read alongside Johnson's other poems, this could mean that the police have closed down the event. The line 'steel blade drinking blood in darkness' could also, therefore, be a metaphor for the depressive silence that occurs when the night is over.

'Night number three' shifts the focus from reggae music to a soul and funk concert at the Rainbow where James Brown is 'screaming soul'. This shift shows how Johnson sees soul and reggae music as closely related black Atlantic musical expressions. It also shows that, in addition to Du Bois, African American popular music has been central to his radical formation. 'Two policeman wounded' suggests that it is the police who are the target of violence. Where the moral status of the previous violence is ambiguous, the violence is here described as 'righteous'.

‘Night number four’ takes place at a blues dance, which was the common name for a Jamaican party in Britain in the 1970s (Gilroy, 2003). The packed environment of the ‘two room’ creates an intimate ethos and implies that it is a private house party. Johnson describes internecine violence as rebellion ‘running down the wrong road’ and ‘blowing down the wrong tree’. We are also introduced to Leroy, who almost bleeds to death. Leroy is the only victim in the poem to be mentioned by name. There is a disparity between the nameless police officers and the personalised description of the black victim. As a result, Johnson generates an intimacy and sympathy that is absent in the previous stanza. Again, the actual fight occurs when the music reaches its climax. Johnson has written elsewhere about music’s capacity to trigger real interpersonal violence:

> But it so happens that, at times, the catharsis does not come through dance, for the violence that the music carries is turned inwards and personalized, so that for no apparent reason, the dance halls and yards often explode into fratricidal violence and general pandemonium (Johnson, 1976, 401).

Johnson calls the Deejay a ‘musical peace keeper’ when the catharsis does not come (Johnson, 1976, 400). He writes that in some cases the Deejay must calm down the audience and remind them that they are at a musical happening where they must behave. The poem has no such didactic voice, refusing to pass any clear judgment on violence.

The fifth night portrays a revenge attack. However, it is not clear which of the previous attacks are retaliatory. Is one gang avenging another, or are the police taking the law into their own hands? Throughout the stanzas, Johnson portrays many different aspects of violence and victimization. The emphasis on the perpetrator’s smooth movements makes the act seem calculated. Johnson here holds up an aspect of violence that is not volcanic or impulsive, but rather devious and cold-blooded. Inspired by dub and sound-system culture, violence is transformed into a rich metaphor that illuminates the many ways in which the aesthetic can make different types of interventions, on both the symbolic and the concrete level. As Johnson writes,‘it so happens that, at times, the catharsis does not come' (Johnson,

1976, 401). Although poetry does make *something* happen, it does not always lead to the positive outcomes, and therefore resists instrumentalisation.

As we saw in the first part of this chapter, poems like ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ and ‘Bass Culture’ emphasise the sensory effects of dub, and explore how dub creates a Jamaican community that other people can be invited into. Johnson’s focus on the political, inspired by dub, fluctuates between an immanent politics of the sensory and a more explicit and committed politics that is hyperaware of the specific local, geographic, and political context. We have seen how he merges and oscillates between these perspectives, and attempts to utilise the political possibilities of each of these approaches. He explicitly criticises the police and other named institutions in order to advocate against the systemic discrimination and marginalisation of black people in Britain. He also uses a more implicit politics of the sensory to highlight the inexpressible memory of slavery (the slave sublime) and the ongoing existential struggle of the ‘sufferer’, and the possibility of embodying defiance, change, and resistance through the aesthetic experience of Jamaican music.

The remainder of the chapter will, conversely, discuss how different poems and thematic concerns in Johnson’s poetry nonetheless often tend to pull *more* towards one of these counterpoints: either, first, that of the ‘committed’ and explicitly political black, third world, or gendered identity politics; or, second, the religious, mystic and universalist representation of the ‘sufferer’. My aim is to treat these two dimensions of the work separately first (though without forgetting their interconnectedness) in order to gain a more refined understanding of how Johnson’s poetry ultimately attempts to universalise Caribbean voices.

3.3 Dub's Particular Voices: Race, Class, and Gender

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Johnson's poetry is that his speakers typically belong to marginalised social groups and participate in what we may describe as identity politics, here defined as 'identity-based social struggles' (Alcoff et al., 2006, 2). To begin this section, I present a reading of the 'New Craas Massakah' to show how Johnson's poetry explores reggae's function in Black British political mobilisation (Wright, 2000; Alexander, 1996; Hebdige, 1996; Partridge, 2010). Whereas the previous chapter primarily attempted to grasp Johnson's aesthetic constructions of *British* in Black British, the focus here will be on the construction of *Blackness*, and how Johnson sees reggae as essential to the creation of black-led political initiatives in the UK. As Johnson argues in the article 'African Consciousness in Reggae: Some Examples', reggae has played an important role in promoting black pride in Britain (Johnson, 2015, 41). By reading Johnson alongside Michael Smith and Jean 'Binta' Breeze, I demonstrate how dub poetry gives voice to 'third world' or class-based identities. I also argue that, perhaps surprisingly, gender identity is made central by these poets, although in the case of Johnson this is not done in a self-conscious or self-critical manner. My aim here is to show that dub poetry's emphasis on cultural specificity and positionality extends beyond race, and that the genre often attempts to situate the speakers in relation to as many different socio-economic coordinates as possible. Dub poetry of the 1970s and '80s, I argue, does not portray minority voices arbitrarily, but engages with an active and directed identity politics in which questions of intersectionality come into play.

'New Craas Massakah' shows how Johnson's poetry often records important and traumatic events in Black British history. Johnson's poetry and its portrayal of reggae and sound-system culture are 'chronicles of black experiences in Britain over three decades' (Fowler, 2016, 69). His poetry helps to narrativise and conceptualise a Black British *struggle*

with its own landmark moments and events. The parties in ‘Street 66’, ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, and ‘New Craas Massakah’ likewise demonstrate that, in the context of Black British history and community action, aesthetic spaces such as the sound system and dancehall, often targeted by the police, have been political battlegrounds. As we saw in the previous chapter, Johnson was called ‘The Bard of Brixton’ (Spencer, 1981). This ‘title’ emphasises that he is often seen as *the* poet who chronicles life in Brixton.

In ‘New Craas Massakah’, Johnson portrays the ‘New Cross house fire’ or Deptford Fire, which took place on the 18th of January in 1981. The fire was allegedly a racially motivated attack on Yvonne Ruddock’s sixteenth birthday party, although the poem criticises the police for never properly pursuing this line of investigation. Tragically, the fire resulted in the deaths of 14 black youths and injured 26 others (Johnson, 2006, 54; Hall, 1999, 188; Gilroy and Bridges, 1982, 35; Smith, 1991). Johnson dedicates the poem ‘to the memory of the fourteen dead’ (Johnson, 2006, 54).[155] The young people enjoying and dancing to the music contrast brutally with the heart-breaking reversal when the house catches fire:

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

di dubbin
an di rubbin
an di rackin to di riddim

di dancin
an di scankin
an di pawty really swingin

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

di heat
an di smoke
an di people staat fi choke

di screamin

[155] Johnson claims there were ‘fourteen dead’ (Johnson, 2006, 54), while Paul Gilroy writes that it was 13 youths that passed away. Apparently 13 people died in the fire, while the 14th victim, Anthony Berbeck, comitted suicide two years later due to trauma-related causes (Bowcott, 2004)

an di cryin
an di diein in di fyah…[156] (Johnson, 2006, 54).

This opening excerpt from the poem is a characteristic way of establishing the mood in Johnson's poetry, one that we also find in 'Street 66', 'Bass Culture', and 'Dread Beat an Blood', with people revelling in the music and dancing to the rhythm. Yet the poem also depicts a musical experience that evolves into a violent attack, as seen in earlier examples. Here, however, there is an even starker contrast between the harmonic opening and the deadly turn.

Unlike some of the other poems I have been discussing, the violence does not evolve from within the group or from the escalation of the music. Instead, the violence is a 'crash' and 'bang' that comes from outside. The musical opening functions as a calm before the storm, rather than escalating and building up to the violent climax. In 'Dread Beat an Blood', the interpersonal violence can be interpreted as 'good' because the musical violence of the bass is good, and the difference between the two is not clearly drawn in the poem's structure. In this poem, the music is not described as violent. Hence, the poem clearly focuses on violence as an evil.

The excerpt shows the party ending in 'an di diein in di fyah…'. In the following stanzas, the speaker analytically reflects on the black community's reaction and the police's investigation: 'Look how di police and di press/ try dem despahret bes/ fi put a stap to wi ques fi di trute' (Johnson, 2006, 57). In between these critical and reflective stanzas, he repeats variations of the opening scene. Johnson oscillates between a critical and activist tone, and a more neutral sensory representation of the attack in which he describes the sensuous experience of being in the house. The narration presents the horrific event in the present tense, but analyses and discusses the event in the past tense. The reader oscillates

[156] The word Fyah' is spelled 'fire' in 'Dread Beat an Blood'. It is possible that Johnson uses a more distinctly Jamaican spelling to express a more urgent radical message in this poem that depicts a traumatic event. We might argue that there is a correlation between the extent of polarisation in the situation in London, the more non-standard English forms are used in the poems.

between the sensory voice that represents the 'now' and the analytical and activist voice that speaks from 'after' the event, experiencing and understanding the implications of the experience. This narrative method reveals Johnson's movement between the positions of both poet and activist. Although the poem is dominated by an explicitly political and committed voice, he actively utilises depictions of the sensory experience of music. One could argue that Johnson uses explicitly political discourse because he thinks there is too much at stake to leave it open to interpretation. He does not allow there to be any ambiguity that 'in spite a dem wicked prapahghanda/ wi refuse fi surrendah/ to dem ugly innuendoh' (Johnson, 2006, 57).

3.3.1 Class and Gender Specificity

> There are sufferers with guns movin breeze through the trees
> there are people waging war in the heat and hunger of
> streets (Johnson, 2006, 21).
>
> for behind I is darkness,
> round I destruction,
> an before I,
> hunger
> a go blow fire! (Smith, 1986, 16).

In the previous chapter, I argued that Johnson's poetry often conforms to the tropes of post-war British social realism by focusing on the young working-class male, his emasculation by the police and his attempts at balancing life at the 'facktri up inna Brackly' with recreation and leisure (Johnson, 2016, 40). I now want to return to this topic while reframing it in the context of dub poetry's engagement with a politically committed identity politics. Reading Johnson's work alongside other dub poets helps us to see how Johnson's emphasis on the young black male has left what might be called a polygonal legacy, both in providing a narrative that women writers could position themselves in opposition to, and in encouraging others to give voice to their own experiences and to embrace their own positionality. The legacy of Johnson's work, despite his sometimes exclusionary focus on masculinity, is as

much reliant on his approach to writing as it is on his topical engagement. Johnson in many ways works according to the principle that the 'personal is political', and this principle has been taken up by both female and male dub poets. When Johnson voices a particular kind of Caribbean and Black British masculinity in Brixton in the 1970s and 1980s, he also furthers the Caribbean tradition of trying to find a poetic form that is honest and true to one's own experiences. Johnson's response to Kamau Brathwaite's ideal of finding Caribbean perceptual models thus recognises the importance of finding ways of writing that represents one's current social and political situation, not only in a national, but also in a personal and individualised capacity.

It is notable that Johnson actively participates in discourses about class, claiming that Britain is 'still class-ridden' in *The Guardian* (Morrison, 2012). In 'Wat About di Workin Class' he writes 'no baddah blame it pan di black workin claas/ mistah racist/ blame it pan di rulin claas' (Johnson, 1991, 37). He is, however, less self-aware and self-critical of the ways in which gender, and particularly masculinity, are central to his poems. Johnson has stressed that the black and white working class share similar interests. Yet, he has also been critical of how, in his eyes, the Socialist Workers Party hijacked black grassroots struggles and saw black people as victims who needed help (Rachel, 2016; Caesar, 1996, 70). His take on this relationship demonstrates that dub poets often display an awareness of intersectional issues, defined as 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (McCall, 2005, 1771; Crenshaw, 1991), while also acknowledging the conflicts that can occur between identity groups. Johnson is, as we will see, more aware of the intersection between race and class, than he is of the intersection between race and gender. From this perspective, there are aspects of Johnson's politics that are more culturally specific and exclusive than often acknowledged. His gendered position and emphasis on

autonomous black movements intensifies the tension between his universalism and his identity politics, and therefore the ambitious nature of trying to achieve both at the same time.

There have been many feminist critiques of dub poetry and of Caribbean poetry more generally, particularly by Caribbean women writers and critics, among them Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Carolyn Cooper, Grace Nichols, Sylvia Wynter, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior and Jamaica Kincaid (Edmondson, 1999; Davies and Savory, 1990; Donnell, 2007, 131–180; Rosenberg, 2007; Espinet, 1989). Nevertheless, it is not my intention to offer a feminist critique of Johnson's poetry or Caribbean poetry here. My aim in focusing on gender is to identify Johnson's interest in cultural specificity and to discuss how it interacts with his universalism, rather than making an ethical or normative evaluation of his gender representations. Such a study would be valuable, but it is not especially relevant to this thesis, which has avoided taking an ethical stance in relation to Johnson's portrayal of violence.

The quotations cited at the beginning of the chapter capture how dub poetry often perform a strong 'third world' identity. I use this term because it is preferred by reggae musicians and does not have condescending connotations in this context.[157] Moreover, the subject of dub poetry, exemplified in the two quotations at the beginning of this section on gender and class, create an interesting juxtaposition between hunger and music. Music is normally associated with enjoyment and choice, while hunger is a product of necessity, a key component of survival, and often of suffering. In 'Bass Culture', Johnson fuses the experience of music and images of abject deprivation: 'bittah cause a blues/ cause a maggot suffering/ cause a blood klaat pressure/ yet still breeding love/ far more mellow' (Johnson, 2006, 15). 'Maggot suffering' blurs the lines between pain, poverty, and the sublime experience of bass music. In Johnson's example, hungering and suffering functions at a metaphorical level related to the experience of music, and its links to the history of slavery.

[157] The band Third World is an example of this affirmative usage, and it is the formulation Jean 'Binta' Breeze prefers in the title of her poetry collection *Third World Girl* (2011).

Perhaps because Michael Smith has a stronger Third World identity than Johnson, who after all lived most of his life in the UK, his poem 'Mi Cyaan Believe It' depicts hunger and poverty in a more prosaic and less symbolic mode. Eric Doumerc observes that Smith's poetry portrays the everyday life of the Jamaican working classes in a very direct and somber way: '[…] there is certainly an aspect of Smith's poetry which is about commenting on the harrowing living and working conditions of the working classes in Jamaica in the late 1970s. Poems like "Mi Cyaan Belive It" and "Youth out deh" deal with social themes in a very straightforward way' (Doumerc, 2008, 81).

To understand the relationship between Johnson's and Smith's writing, it is first necessary to outline some context. Michael Smith (Mikey Smith) was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1956. He performed his poetry in Cuba and Venezuela in the late 1970s, graduated from the Jamaica School of Drama in 1980, and represented Jamaica at Carifesta the same year. In 1982, he also participated at the First International Book Fair of Black Writers and Third World Books organised by a group that included John La Rose. This once again points to the Caribbean Artist Movement's impact on younger poets, and its relevance to dub poetry. 'Upon Westminster Bridge', Anthony Wall's documentary about Smith, documents Smith's time in London and his encounter with figures such as C.L.R. James and Johnson. The title, which references William Wordsworth, exemplifies Caribbean poetry's use of appropriation, as discussed in chapter one. Smith's LP 'Mi Cyaan Belive It' was recorded during his stay in London and the record was produced by Johnson, demonstrating the latter's role in promoting other likeminded dub and performance poets. Sadly, with much creative potential still to realise, Smith was brutally killed in 1983 following a clash with three men at a political rally (Doumerc, 2008; Morris, 1989; Johnson, 2007).

'Me Cyaan Believe It' is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. Crucially, the monologue form creates a convincing and realistic, if not also *realist*, narrative wherein the

first person perspective implies that the feelings expressed provide insight into the mind and feelings of a reliable and authentic speaker (Sinfield, 2014). The monologue is delivered by a man who struggles to accept his difficult life situation. He has five hungry children to care for and his daughter is pregnant, giving him, as the household's main provider, more children to feed. He utters a heart-wrenching 'laaaaawd' and calls upon the Lord to rescue him from his misery. He also depicts the downtrodden state of his house: 'me seh mi cyaan believe it/ me seh mi cyaan believe it/ Room dem a rent/ me apply widin/ but as me go een cocroach rat and scorpion/ also come een' (Smith, 1986, 13). Reminiscent of Johnson's maggots, the cockroaches and scorpions illustrate how both poets use pests and vermin to depict poverty, struggle, and deprivation. The cockroaches can also be seen as symbolising the 'bittersweet stubbornness of life' and the heroic dimension of being able to survive in such deprivation (Hollingsworth, 2001, 214). Furthermore, the use of scorpions, cockroaches, and maggots elicit the primordial fear of death and burial, and the imagery of dread, beat, and blood. The focus on insects therefore convey dub poetry's elegiac and existential, yet life-affirming undercurrent.[158]

Hunger equally serves an important function in conveying the troubled relationship between men and women in squalid conditions.[159] Hunger makes it difficult to uphold an illusion of domestic bliss under a state of everlasting crisis: 'Dem waan meck love pon hungry belly/ jus fi figet dis moment of poverty/ but she mus get breed/ and dem haffi go face dem calamity' (Smith, 1986, 29). Smith describes sex as an escape from hunger, but notes that the lovers will eventually have to face the consequences of their escapism if the woman gets pregnant. This creates a condition of 'dread' where love and sexuality provides comfort, but eventually turns out to be the vehicle of more agony. Generally, in Smith's and Johnson's

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[158] See 'University of Hunger' and 'I come from the Nigger yard' (Carter, 2006, 84, 101) for a possible precursor to this Third World-realism and existentialist expression found in the work of Smith and Johnson.
[159] See also Gordon Rohlehr's analysis of gender representations in calypso in the 1930s, in which he highlights how male and female conflict was 'the logical product of the context of survivalism' (Rohlehr, 1988, 204).

writing, women function to illuminate the personal failure and systemic oppression of male characters: 'di breddah seh him bruk/ him seh him naw wok/ him seh him woman a breed/ him seh him dont even hav a stick a weed' (Johnson, 2006, 4). The male narrator's girlfriend is pregnant but interestingly pregnancy is presented as *his* rather than her or their shared problem. In 'Me Cyaan Believe it', the lack of control over women's bodies is one of the problems faced by the father as a dispossessed patriarch. As for Johnson's depiction of working-class British masculinity, economic deprivation and global racial inequality is intertwined with feelings of emasculation. Hortense Spillers and bell hooks are among the prominent black feminist critics who argue that the history of slavery places the black family outside the traditional ideals of the 'all American' family and the gender norms expected within that symbolic structure (Spillers, 1987; hooks, 2004, 4; Hodge, 1977). Smith brings attention to how fatherhood, which is usually a symbol of patriarchal power, becomes anxiety-inducing when one does not have the social or economic means to provide for one's family. In the poem 'I an I alone', Smith further reveals how fatherhood is associated with powerlessness rather than authority:

Picni-dem a bawl
rent to pay
wife to obey
but only jesus know de way!
De meek shall inherit de earth
an de fullness thereof!

But look what she inherit?
Six months pregnant, five mout fi feed,
and her man deh a jail, no bail (Smith, 1986, 29).

Here, Smith yet again overlays pregnancy, hunger, and problems faced by men. However, in this particular instance, the woman's problems are also acknowledged because her husband or boyfriend is in jail. One could argue that 'wife to obey' puts the woman in a position of authority. The juxtaposition of 'wife to obey' and 'rent to pay' nonetheless demonstrates that women are presented as merely one bullet point on a long list of men's responsibilities.

Conversely, in the second stanza, the speaker points at the unfairness of what women 'inherit' from these situations. Moreover, the title 'I an I alone' corresponds with dub poetry's typical portrayal of existential dread and anxiety that cannot be defined as either male or female as Smith's gender perspective shifts throughout the poem, as she rejects a male suitor: 'Cho, Roy, man! Let me go, no, man?/ Me no want no man inna '81!' (Smith, 1986, 29). Notwithstanding these nuances, however, Smith's and Johnson's poetry still overwhelmingly privileges the male perspective.

Despite the fact that Johnson does not self-consciously engage with gender, the experience of racism and exclusion is, almost without exception, embodied in the character of the black man. Mervyn Morris describes performance poetry as male-dominated, rightly observing that 'Linton Kwesi Johnson's work (which is important) seems virtually unaware of gender; though "Inglan is a Bitch" and "Sonny's Lettah" is addressed to Mama' (Morris, 1993, 78).[160] The black man is depicted as the primary victim of police violence, and the one who will have to violently defend the black community from the forces of oppression. Considering the Fanonian element of Johnson's poetry, it is worth noting how Fanon's writing, as Elleke Boehmer observes, views the colonial struggle as 'a struggle waged by men against men' (Boehmer, 2005, 9). Johnson's portrayal of physical violence operates in accordance with this tendency to gender the freedom fighter as male. Still, the aestheticisation of violence as a rhetorical ideal complicates such a reading because it depersonalises violence and abstracts it from the individual level. We therefore have to distinguish between claiming that Johnson's formal ideals are masculine – for the sake of comparison, think of how Amelia Jones has identified the masculine ideologies of abstract expressionism and Greenbergian modernism – and talking about the gendering of Johnson's characters and speakers (Jones, 1994). I primarily focus on the latter issue here, although I do

[160] Although Morris is right to observe that the genre is male-dominated, we must not forget how important Louise Bennett has been to the development and acceptance of oral poetry in the Caribbean.

not preclude the possibility that these dimensions sometimes work together. This is especially the case when Johnson's formal choices are seen from the perspective of female dub poets such as Jean 'Binta' Breeze, who see these as related and who have attempted to feminise the norms of the genre, as we will become apparent.

The rude boy, who plays a central role in Johnson's poetry, is almost always a 'boy', as the name indicates, with a taste for fashion, music, and women: 'di bredrin dem stan-up/ outside a Hip City/ as usual, a look pretty' (Johnson, 2006, 3). Women are also present, but primarily as antagonists who men encounter on their journeys: 'him site a likkle sistah/ him move fi pull a scank/ but she soon sus him out/ seh him dont in her rank' (Johnson, 2006, 4). 'Sistah' can refer to the typical familial expression of solidarity between black men and woman. The inclusion of 'likkle', however, makes the comment infantilising and condescending. In 'Yout Scene', Johnson describes the 'bredrin' being chased and beaten by the police. Their own crimes are presented as relative to the police's brutality: 'but di breddah dem a scank;/ dem naw rab bank;/ is pakit dem a pick/ an is woman dem a lick/ an is run dem a run when di wicked come' (Johnson, 2006, 3). The men do not rob banks, the speaker reassures – they only commit petty crime that does not justify the police's exaggerated response. The speaker follows up by informing that 'an is woman dem a lick' – they batter women. This collocation of pick-pocketing and domestic violence trivialises violence towards women in a rather shocking way. Johnson is in many ways enacting the nastier side of the 'rude boy' character, especially the misogynistic and chauvinistic undercurrents, described by Carolyn Cooper as 'badmanism' (Niaah, 2006: Cooper, 2007, 153). It is, though, hard to determine whether Johnson mocks this misogyny, is trying to give a realistic depiction of social problems, or is simply expressing his own personal views. As with many other depictions of violence in his poetry, there is no didactic message or corrective moral to dissolve this moral ambiguity.

When asked about whether feminism has impacted his work, Johnson has replied in the negative and has openly stated that he 'was always a little ambivalent about feminism' (Caesar, 1996, 73). This tendency to position issues of race above those of gender, instead of seeing them as deeply intertwined, is widely criticised by black feminists such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (hooks, 1981; Davis, 1983; Morrison, 1973; Walker, 1983). Johnson certainly has an ambivalent, if not entirely negative, relationship with feminism. Yet, he also has a more ambivalent relationship with identity politics in general, something not usually recognised by his critics. In addition, Johnson's oscillation between explicitly committed politics and disinterest becomes visible in his treatment of gender. Although this section of the chapter explores aspects of his poetry that tend toward the former, this tension remains present nonetheless. When it comes to race, he often emphasises the importance of black-led active political involvement and organisation. Gender seems to be dissolved into the category of the 'sufferer' with which Johnson's poetry is preoccupied, and which does not require any separate action.[161] Understandably, this selective universalism is problematic when viewed from a feminist perspective.

If viewed through the lens of Samuel Selvon however, it is tempting to contend that Johnson's portrayal of masculinity is symptomatic of the hegemony of male writers among Caribbean migrant and ex-patriot writers (Forbes, 2005). In Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), many of the male characters refer to women simply as 'skin' and young women are primarily depicted as sexual conquests. There are also some scenes of extreme domestic violence (Selvon, 2006, 92; 54) [1956]. Set in this context, Johnson's poetry continues Selvon's primary focus on the male immigrant experience and the more problematic chauvinist aspects of this phenomenon (Forbes 2005; Houlden, 2017; Basso, 2016). Alison

[161] In poem 'Reggae fi May Ayim', the masculine perspective of Johnson's speakers are more gender-aware, acknowledging the political contribution of women. The poem pays homage to the German activist May Ayim, who was an important figure in the black-German movement: 'it woz in di dazzlin atmosphere/ a di black radical bookfair/ dat mi site yu/ sweet sistah/ brite-eyed like hope/ like a young antelope/ who couda cope (Johnson, 2006, 91).

Donnell argues that the emphasis on migration and diaspora experience in Caribbean writing has often failed to address the fact that it was primarily men who left the Caribbean in the 1950s, while many women and children were left behind. According to Donnell, there is a bias in favour of metropolitan Caribbean writers in exile that disadvantages female writers based in the Caribbean, or who write about life at home (Donnell, 2006, 130–180). Johnson's poetry is not an exception in this regard, but it does not follow that male dominance is a characteristic of dub poetry distinct from other Caribbean forms of writing, or from modernist writing that centre exile more generally.[162] What is definitive of the genre, I suggest, is the tendency to locate the speaker's political criticism in a particularly intimate and personal voice, where gender, race, and class are pivotal factors that are foreshadowed and brought to the reader's attention by both men and women writers. Kate Houlden argues that Caribbean migrant writings of the 1950s and 1960s 'often invoke a particularly excessive kind of masculine performance' where portrayals of black male sexuality have been of crucial significance (Houlden, 2017, 49). However, Johnson's 'excessive' masculine performance is generally more constructed through his depictions of violence, the rioters, and the 'serious' intellectual leader. Sexuality is not particularly prominent in his writing, and interactions are relatively cerebral even when woman are involved. Interestingly, it is the female dub poet Jean 'Binta' Breeze who has emphasised the importance of sensuality as an alternative to what she perceives as the self-important intellectualism and radicalism of male dub poets (Breeze, 1990).

Indicative of the friendly, yet also productively contrasting, stylistic relationship between them, Johnson helped to introduce Breeze's work to an international audience by inviting her to London in 1985, where she has lived ever since. Breeze, born in Jamaica in 1957, is an actor, storyteller, dancer, director, and undoubtedly the most prominent female

[162] See, for instance, David Marriott's analysis of the masculinity of the figure of Crusoe in the work of Derek Walcott (Marriott, 2014).

dub poet. Breeze has also released recordings on LKJ Records (Sharpe, 2003). In her article ‘Can a Dub Poet be a Woman?’, Breeze questions the idea that one cannot say something politically important by talking about personal experiences (Breeze, 1990, 48).[163] Yet, this is a feature we easily recognise in her writing because it is often used to describe writing by women (Smith and Watson, 1998, 36). Breeze has expressed frustration that she is often asked questions about her personal life because of the assumption that women are more interested in talking about politics from a subjective perspective (Breeze et al., 1999). Turning this on its head, the emphasis on the personal and intimate is a feature that is also highly relevant to male dub poetry, as I have demonstrated through my discussions of Johnson. I therefore wish to question how this tendency has been read as a feature of specifically female dub poetry.

Breeze's poem ‘Birth Rites’ is overtly ‘womanist’. Womanism is a ‘social change perspective’ emerging from the everyday experiences of women of colour and their various methods for resisting patriarchy. In a nutshell, it is a form of feminism which is often framed as an alternative to both white and middle-class-dominated feminisms. Womanism sees sexism, classism, and racism as deeply intertwined and endorses intersectional approaches. The African American writer Alice Walker is often credited for popularising the term (Phillips, 2006; Kolawole, 1997; Walker, 1983; Lorde, 1983). While Smith and Johnson present pregnancy as a source of anxiety for men, Breeze reconfigures child bearing as a creative process: ‘brown moons of eyes/ throw pools of light/ upon the damp and tangled passage/ of her growth/ rising from the rushes/ she births words/ and dwells/ among us’ (Breeze, 2011,77). Breeze draws an analogy between birth and poetry, as womanhood becomes essential to the act of writing itself.

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[163] For a discussion of how Breeze genders the role of the DJ and the ‘cut-and-mix’ technology of dub, see ‘Cartographies of Globalisation, Technologies of Gendered Subjectivities: The Dub Poetry of Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’ (Sharpe, 2003).

This attempt at 'writing the body' by seeing it as the starting point for female writing has often been central to '*écriture féminine*', defined by French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous (Kristeva, 1982; Cixous, 1975). In the Anglophone world, Eavan Boland might be said to be a prominent example of this kind of writing (Jones, 1981; Randolph, 2014). Breeze not only feminises dub poetry, but also treats poetry as an inherently female art form. I argue that Brathwaite's concept of Caribbean perceptual models encourages sentiments in Breeze's writing that are similar to the practice of *écriture feminine*. They both stimulate forms of poetry that reflect their own authentic and honest voice, and they both frame the personal as political.[164] From this perspective, the relationship between aesthetics and identity politics apparent in Breeze's writing grows out of the discussions of Caribbean perceptual models in the Caribbean canon. Some of dub poetry's gender representations allow us to see how the canon stimulates an awareness of identity-based aesthetics beyond race and nationality.

The conviction that the personal is political also becomes evident in Johnson's poetry. In the poem 'Sonny's Lettah', Johnson writes about police violence from the perspective of a young male in prison who sends a letter to his mother:

> Brixtan Prison
> Jebb Avenue
> Landan south-west two
> Inglan
>
> Dear Mama
> Good day.
> I hope dat wen
> deze few lines meet yu
> they may find yu in di bes af helt (Johnson, 2006, 27).

This epistolary poem depicts the inequalities faced by black men in the UK through an intimate and personal form of address. The line 'dear mama' creates a familial atmosphere where political issues are mediated through a private conversation in the domestic sphere.

[164] The role of the mother figure has played a central role in postcolonial women's writing. For an extended account of the depiction of motherhood, see Elleke Boehmer's 'Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist Sons: Theorising the En-gendered Nation' (Boehmer, 2005, 22–41).

While many of Johnson's poems such as 'All We Doin is Defendin' exhibit actual confrontation with the police – 'soh lissen man/ get ready fi tek some blows' (Johnson, 2006, 11) – 'Sonny's Lettah' portrays the aftermath of the event, and the ways violence not only affects those directly involved, but also their family relations. The physical bravado and aestheticisation of violence seen in some of the other poems are here replaced with a vulnerable and careful voice. One could speculate that the implied reader of the letter, the mother, alters the tone of the narrator into a less self-consciously 'street-wise' performance. Johnson, like Breeze, associates the domestic space with the mother figure. In Johnson's poetry, this space offers a tenderness and safety that contrasts with the rudeness and rioting of the streets.

This dichotomy between female sensitivity and masculine anger, the safety of the home and the riot of the street, is subverted in Breeze's poetry. In 'Caribbean Women', Breeze celebrates the strength and independence of black women: 'oh, man,/ oh, man,/ de Caribbean woman/ she doan fraid a de marchin beat/ she doan care how he timin sweet/ she doan care if she kill a man/ jus doan mash up she plan' (Breeze, 2011, 92). 'She doan care if she kill a man' emphasises the lengths to which she will go to convey her point. Violence and images of rioting found in Johnson's poetry resurface in Breeze's poems in a romantic and domestic context: 'love/ amidst the war/ you and I/ caught/ in the riot/ of our lives' (Breeze, 2011, 41). In 'love amidst the war' the riot is transformed from an expression of the young black man's rage and existential angst played out in the streets into an observation about romantic relationships under tough conditions. Furthermore, in the poem 'Love Song', Breeze 'womanises' weapons and tools in order to take away their dangerous associations: 'if i had a machete/ i would/ like all/ my/ family/ plant us/ a garden/ if i had a gun/ i would/ shoot locks off treasures/ open vaults' (Breeze, 2011, 75). Breeze employs icons of Jamaican violence such as guns and machetes in a domestic and constructive framework, and as such

subverts these symbols in order to tell a feminised story about the Caribbean. Similarly, Michael Smith's poem 'Man a chat' connects macho-culture with the problem of crime in the Caribbean: 'Everywhere yuh go/ yuh hear a man chat bout gunshot/ yuh hear who got drop/ an who still a face de sun-shot' (Smith, 1986, 39). Interestingly, Breeze embraces the stereotype that women are somehow more naturally loving or peaceful than men, and so does not disrupt relatively traditional gender dichotomies.

Regardless of whether dub poetry conforms to gender norms or rejects them, points of view are often explored from a gender-specific perspective. Breeze's 'writing back' to the male voices is articulated by a 'womanly' voice. Likewise, when Johnson celebrates the woman activist May Ayim, it is from the perspective of a 'brother' paying respect to a 'sweet sistah' (Johnson, 2006, 91). In this way, dub poetry remains rooted in a mostly binary understanding of both sex and gender (Butler, 1990). Yet, while not pluralist, dub poetry is not wholly essentialist either. If *écriture feminine* is also often met with accusations of essentialism (Jones, 1991, 255), such criticism of dub poetry misses a crucial point. Paul Gilroy makes an observation about black Atlantic culture which is relevant for dub poetry's understanding of race, and perhaps of identity more generally, including gender. Gilroy argues that black Atlantic culture rejects both ethnic absolutism and 'a sceptical, saturnalian pluralism' (Gilroy, 1993, 102). This compromise between absolutism and anti-essentialism is crucial for understanding Johnson's universalism. It is played out in Johnson's poetry, and becomes especially visible in his engagement with the universalist ideals in dub music and in Caribbean poetry.

3.4 Universal Dub: Eschatology and Black Utopianism

> For the Jamaican poet Kei Miller, Walcott's most important contribution was perhaps his assertion of his Caribbean identity and his confidence that this identity was enough to encompass all of human experience. 'Walcott always insisted that he was a Caribbean writer', Miller said, 'and that this wasn't a limit, that it didn't make his work parochial. I always say I want to write a large literature from a small place, and it is Walcott who embodies that attitude more than anyone else' (Lea, 2017).

These observations were made by Kei Miller in response to the death of Derek Walcott. Miller, whose writing, along with that of Marlon James, is clearly inspired by reggae, is not commonly categorised as a dub poet (Miller, 2013). Indicatively, he remarks that Walcott's universalist ambition underlies his influence on subsequent generations of Caribbean poets. In this final section of the chapter, I discuss how Johnson furthers the Caribbean canon's conviction that Caribbean experiences can 'encompass all of human experience'. In Johnson's case, Walcott's universalist belief system is strengthened by the influence of dub and reggae music, where the experiences of Jamaica's ghetto dwellers are simultaneously seen as the experience of 'all sufferers' (Johnson, 1976, 399). As discussed in the opening exposition of this chapter, Johnson emphasises dub's ability to speak to the human condition, revealing in turn how he is deeply embedded in a black aesthetic discourse. In his work, the belief systems of reggae music are complemented by the influence of the utopian and universalist impulses of Du Bois and the New Negro Movement. Johnson adapts these currents in black (Atlantic) aesthetics to the stylistic and political currents of his experience as a young man in Brixton in the late 1970s, as I will demonstrate.

In addition to detailing the immediate sensory experience of dub and its political implications for the individual and the community, we have seen that dub poetry participates in a committed identity politics. In the following, however, I consider how dub poetry engages with suffering as a problem that concerns all of humanity, regardless of social, racial, and geographical particularities. The chapter attempts to illustrate how Johnson wavers between these dimensions depending on context, whilst also on occasion struggling to

reconcile them. In this chapter's conclusion, I suggest that the acknowledgment of these different yet intertwined ambitions asks us to reflect on which aspects we as critics and readers wish to emphasise, and what our emphasis may say about Johnson's role as a practicing poetry, as well as its implications for the future of dub poetry.

I begin by looking at Johnson's use of prophetic and eschatological language to express the belief that all human beings will ultimately face the moment of judgement. Christopher Partridge, who works at the intersection between popular culture and theology, highlights this utopian element of Rastafari culture by arguing that millenarianism, defined as the belief in a possible paradise on earth, is central to its belief system (Partridge, 2009). As we will discover, Johnson presents a utopian sentiment that is inspired by both Rastafari mysticism and the African American radical tradition. One of the key differences, however, is that Johnson has a stronger and more apocalyptic emphasis on punishment, which is symptomatic of the violent undercurrent in his work. There is therefore also a dystopian element that grates against his utopian vision.[165] Subsequently, I show how Johnson's ambiguous use of 'I' in the poems blurs the distinction between the self and the other, and therefore also challenges or contradicts the Manichean world view expressed in some of his other poems. In Johnson's poetry, our destiny is deeply entwined with that of others, which is both the beauty and the tragedy of the human condition: we are 'I and I'.

Johnson's poetry often insists on facing reality in a clear-cut and confrontational manner, yet he also incorporates an idealistic and utopian vision of redemption in the future. Is there a contradiction between facing the brutal nature of reality and, at the same time, affirming a utopian future in a semi-religious manner? Interestingly, dub poetry's emphasis on accepting reality and the true state of things has traits in common with biblical teachings:

> Wen wi can't face reality
> wi leggo wi clarity

[165] In the study of utopian literature, it is widely recognised that utopias often contain dystopian elements, or that utopia is represented negatively through dystopias (Clayes, 2010, 107).

som latch awn to vanity
some hol insanity
some get vizshan
start preach relijan
but dem can't mek decishan
wen it comes to wi fite
dem can't med decishan
wen it comes to wi rites (Johnson, 2002, 35).

Johnson's interest in reality, expressed through the social realist strategies explored in the previous chapter, appears to be based on the belief that 'you shall know the truth, and the truth [not blissful ignorance and not elaborate deception] shall make you free' (John 8:30; NKJV). His insistence on reality needs to be understood as a creolized Black British variant of British post-war social realism, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, if we look at the work of other dub poets, the emphasis on social realism is simultaneously connected to their ambivalent relationship with religion. In the above quotation, Johnson frames 'reality' as an opposition to 'relijan'. Johnson is probably best defined as a historical materialist; his rejection of Rastafari ideas about Jah and Haile Selassie, and his emphasis on class struggle, suggests this (Caesar, 1996, 68). In this reading however, I use historical materialism in very broad and general terms to refer to conceptions of history that focus on how socials relations are determined by the means of production and the division of labour (Marx, 1904) [1859]. Johnson's emphasis on reality and his rejection of Rastafari as religion, rather than culture, explains why many associate him with Marxism and the British Left, rather than Rastafari spirituality as such (Prasad, 2002; Eldridge, 1996, 98).

Dub Poetry's scientific rather than religious understanding of society, is also evident in Breeze's work: 'Reality/ Reality/ Time we take a stock of reality/ Then come new laws on sanitation/ designed to cut down on the pollution/ but the big man's factory/ dumps it's waste into the sea/ and the food we eat is full of radiation' (Breeze, 2011, 138).[166] Like Johnson,

[166] I do not want to overstate the point about historical materialism because the term has a complexity that I will not be able to properly discuss here.

Breeze insists that we have to face the real political processes that create poverty and inequality. In the poem 'Aid Travels With a Bomb', Breeze criticises the World Monetary Fund: 'Aid travels with a bomb'/ watch out/ Aid travels with a bomb/ you don't know they're on CIA fee/ or even with the KGB/ cause you think you country is oh so free/ until you look at the economy/ Aid travels with a bomb/ watch out!!' (Breeze, 2011, 137). Breeze and Johnson frequently direct their criticisms at concrete political infrastructures. Although there is a different level of generality involved in talking about the IMF and global capitalism than in talking about Margaret Thatcher or the local police, they are all named institutions, people, and organisations which are subjected to harsh criticism. The problem of poverty and discrimination is therefore not presented as some unfortunate coincidence or unwilled misfortune: the blame is placed on real institutions, politicians and economic organisations.

While Johnson's focus is often on the worldly not to say material, his rhetoric of warning and prophesy has an eschatological dimension. The term 'eschatology' derives from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means 'last'. It refers to the study of 'the final end of things' and 'the ultimate resolution of the entire creation'. A distinction is usually made between 'issues of personal and cosmic eschatology' (Walls, 2008, 4), and Johnson often engages with both by describing everyday scenes that are nevertheless loaded with eschatological messages. Eschatology is central to reggae music's sense of time, as Sarah Daynes argues: 'In reggae music, the eschatology is everywhere: it defines both practices and representations that belong to the present, contaminating them, as it were, by charging them with meaning' (Daynes, 2010, 1). Johnson's poetry is eschatological in the sense that he warns us of a point of no return, a climax that is fast approaching: 'soh life tek the form whe shif from calm/ an hold di way of a deadly storm' (Johnson, 2006, 15). Meanwhile, Breeze warns us that we should 'watch out!!', a seemingly mundane utterance that helps to position the poet in a position of knowledge and prophetic capability.

Several of Johnson's poems also close with a warning. 'Yout Scene', a relatively light-hearted poem about young men 'hanging' outside of a record shop in Brixton, ends with the forewarning: 'but di breddah dem a scank; dem naw rab bank; is pakit dem a pick/ an is woman dem a lick/ an is run dem a run when di wicked come' (Johnson, 2006, 3). 'Di wicked' might refer to the police in this context, but it also carries connotations of the devil and the harsh judgement that awaits us on judgement day. It is therefore difficult to distinguish righteous from unjust punishment in this quotation. If it is the police who are 'di wicked', then it is probably meant to signify the former. Perhaps, though, a slightly different sentiment is expressed whereby the wicked will punish and devour each other.

We find yet another warning in 'All wi Doin is Defendin': 'all wi doin/ is defendin/ soh get yu ready/ fi war…war…/ freedom is a very firm thing' (Johnson, 2006, 11). Another example of warning, figures in 'Street 66'. The poem ends with a violent threat: '"Yes, dis is street 66"; step rite in an tek some licks' (Johnson, 2006, 10). Though not obviously a warning, it functions as one because the confrontation never actually occurs in the poem and thus the threat of its future possibility continues to hang over the reader. We also see the emphasis on prophesy in Michael Smith's 'It a come' and Johnson's 'Time Come':

it soon come
it soon come:
is di shadow walkin behind yu
is I stan-up rite before yu;
look out!

but it too late now:
I did warn yu.

(Johnson, 2016, 20).

for it a come
fire a go bun
blood a go run
it goin go teck you
it goin go teck you

not only fi I
but fi you too (Smith, 1986, 1986).

In these two poems, Johnson and Smith warn the reader about the approaching moment when the pain sufferers already know and feel will become our own: 'it going go teck yu'. The stanzas are made up of five lines. Each stanza is broken apart by a dramatic pause before the two final lines gently reinstate the inescapability of their prophesied future. The function of

the warning is not so much to avoid this apocalypse, which is already underway, but to remind us of its inevitability: ‘is di shadow walkin behind yu' (Johnson, 2002, 23). Carolyn Cooper similarly describes the ‘prophetic certainty’ of Michael Smith’s poems, which ‘portends the imminent collapse of repressive political systems such as South Africa’s British-bolstered apartheid’ (1987, 94). As Cooper's description of the downfall of oppression as ‘imminent’ suggests, the future in these poems is made into a presence, something at work here and now, although we are not necessarily conscious of it at all times. The image of the shadow captures this tendency to make the future present, and the downfall of oppression latent. Johnson has relatedly commented on Lee Perry’s use of shadow imagery: ‘he spoke in parables about things like “the shadow that walketh underneath a man”’ (Katz, 2003, 275). The end of world is already present among us as a shadow, and in the *memento mori* of the ghetto children.

Dub poetry’s utopianism is therefore not merely a passive, idealistic dream about the future. Johnson’s use of eschatological language builds on the prospect of future justice in order to criticise the unfairness of the present. This hope for the future shapes actions and perception by acknowledging that the current situation is not yet as it should be.[167] People should be aware of the justice that will be meted out to them for allowing others to suffer: ‘di people dem a bawl/ fi mercy dung deh/ dem cant get noh mercy/ mercy noh dung deh’ (Johnson, 2006, 18).

Johnson and Du Bois both see black music and black radical thought as forward-looking and ultimately utopian in nature.[168] As Du Bois writes, ‘Through all of the sorrow songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things (Du Bois, 2015, 197).

[167] For one of the most influental accounts of how utopianism and anticipations of the future shape and drive the present, see Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* (Bloch, 1995) [1954].

[168] For more on the utopian aspect of black arts and music see Paul Gilroy’s ‘The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity’ in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Gilroy, 2003) and Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* (Kelley, 2002). For a recent accunt of utopianism in postcolonial literature, see Bill Ashcroft’s *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (Ashcroft, 2016).

Likewise, Johnson writes in 'Di Anfinish Revalueshan': 'histri biggah dan mi ar yu yu know/ time cyaan steal but it can heal/ soh shake di dew fram out yu hed/ wipe di cabweb fram yu face/ wi gat nuff work fi dhu/ far we noh reach mount zion/ yet (Johnson, 2006, 108). Johnson sees the revolution as unfinished, with freedom yet to be fulfilled. 'Mount Zion', the name of a hill in Jerusalem, alludes to the role of the Old Testament in Rastafarian mythology and reggae lyricism. Zion is seen as the negation of the Babylonian West (Edmonds, 2012, 41). By using the Zion to describe a form of political and spiritual promised land, Johnson is clearly inspired by Rastafari spirituality. Johnson also uses a similar spiritual metaphor when he refers to mountains in 'Mi Revalueshanary Fren': 'an wen yu think yu reach di mountain tap/ is a bran-new platow yu goh buck-up' (Johnson, 2006, 68).

Mountain metaphors are also frequently used in African American literature and historical speeches, especially if refracted through biblical influences. This awareness helps us to see Johnson's place in a broader black radical tradition where utopian messages about the future are central. The speeches of Martin Luther King are perhaps the some of the most well-known examples: 'I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted (*Yes*), every hill and mountain shall be made low', and he rejoices, 'from every mountainside, let freedom ring!" (King,1963) – indeed, his last speech was famously entitled 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' (1968). Other examples include Langston Hughes' essay, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' (1926), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 2001) [1954]. These utopian visions of the future are designed to inspire people to act here and now 'wi gat nuff work fi dhu' (Johnson, 2006, 108). Johnson, like Du Bois, evokes future justice to highlight the urgent need for change. As Henry Louis Gates Jr writes: 'Reggae is the channel for urging forth an inevitable and drastic social change…soon' (Gates, 1976, 304). Johnson's poetry therefore thematises what Du Bois describe as the sorrow song's faith

in the future: ‘sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes it is faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond’ (Du Bois, 2015, 197).

Johnson’s use of violent imagery is, nonetheless, very much linked to a utopian vision of justice for the oppressed and punishment for the oppressors. However, it is impossible to deny that, as with many apocalyptic end-time prophesies, there is a romantic view of violence inherent in the notion of good violently overthrowing and cauterizing evil, and where ‘di wicked’ is clearly distinguished from ‘di forces of victri’. It is then suggestive that there are commonalities between Johnson’s aestheticisation of violence and apocalyptic – or 'end time' – thinking more generally. There is often a narrative of violence at the core of end time thinking, according to Christopher Partridge, ‘Between the contemporary last days and the idyllic millennial period […] the forces of evil will be violently overthrown and the principal beliefs of the group vindicated’ (Partridge, 2008, 201).

Many of Johnson’s poems revolve around a battle between good and evil. The evil forces are often embodied by the Police, and the poems are written from the perspectives of the persecuted: ‘fi mek di rulah dem andastan/ dat wi naw tek noh more a dem oppreshan’ (Johnson, 2006, 60). As mentioned earlier, Johnson’s poetry expresses an ambivalent and complicated view of violence, where violence is legitimate, so long as it is ‘di wicked’ who are punished. The ethical implication of this view is that, in the end, justice will prevail. Crucially, this justice will be realised not now, maybe not to tomorrow, *but in the end*. Johnson’s Manichean world view might be accused of painting an un-nuanced picture of the world. Were there no good policemen? Can people be so easily divided into good and evil? Johnson’ polemical understanding of good and evil could also be seen as a part of the hard-hitting rhetoric discussed earlier in the chapter. Johnson’s poetry aspires towards powerful and violent rhetorical effects rather than balance, and this may impact his ethics. A poem like

‘Street 66’, however, does show that some of the oppressed black men also oppress the women that they ‘lick’ (hit), suggesting some nuancing of simplistic binaries.

Despite this apocalyptic violence, the poetry is optimistic and hopeful because it sees history as unfinished: ‘dow wi slip-up an stumbe pan di way/ wi still reach far doun freedam street/ still mindful af di minefields pan di way’ (Johnson, 2006, 107). Johnson’s belief in a redemptive future becomes particularly prominent in poems such as ‘Beacon of Hope’ and ‘Mi Revalueshanary Fren’, where he pays homage to Caribbean activists and intellectuals. ‘Beacon of Hope’ is dedicated to John La Rose, one of the central founders of the Caribbean Artist Movement: ‘tonight fear fades to oblivion/ as you guide us beyond the stars/ to a new horizon’ (Johnson, 2006, 63). ‘Mi Revalueshanary Fren’ is a homage to C.L.R. James: ‘I ad woz to agree wid mi fren/ hopin dat wen wi meet up wance agen/ wi couda av a more fulah canvahsaeshan’ (Johnson, 2006, 70). In the first poem, Johnson portrays the black community leader as a guiding light, someone who leads the black struggle forward. In the latter example, the emphasis on ‘revolutionary’ in the title evokes the utopian impulse of his writing where the ultimate goal is to create a new way of being together. By referring to the possibility of a future conversation with James, Johnson not only uses the religious motif of the afterlife; he also creates an image wherein the struggles of different generations of black radicals merge into a higher way of being.

The eschatological dimension of dub poetry gives the oppressed hope that their suffering has meaning, and that they will experience justice at a later moment in history. This characteristic plays a central role in conveying dub poetry’s emancipatory politics of hope and radical idealism, which is simultaneously committed to violently changing society here and now. Fred D’Aguiar points to the reggae artist Tappa Zukie’s interest in challenging our perception of time and community, and the radical political statement this enables. Tappa Zukie ‘posits a Rastafarian consciousness able to travel backwards and forwards in time and

willing to find and forge allegiances with struggles waged by the oppressed anywhere on the planet' (D'Aguiar, 2007, 30).

In this chapter's conclusion, I want to return to the prophetic energy of 'Song of Blood' and 'It a Come', to illustrate how Johnson blurs the first and second person perspective. When Smith writes 'not only fi I/ but fi you too', he implies that suffering is always deeply personal, something experienced through the perspective of the 'I'. Yet, for Johnson and Michael Smith, the difference between the 'I' and the 'you' is often indistinct in the poems' structures. When Johnson writes 'is di shadow walkin behind yu', it is impossible to tell whether he is using 'you' to refer to the second person or to a generic 'you' which could also mean 'we'. The same goes for Smith's 'it going to teck you'. Both poems can be seen as alluding to Rastafari speech patterns or 'dread talk' where 'I and I' is a common phrase. It has different usages but often signifies 'oneness' with Jah (God) and with others (McFarlane, 1998; Pollard, 2000). Similarly, Carolyn Cooper argues that Smith's poem 'Me Cyan believe it' draws a link between the suffering of the individual and collective suffering: 'That heart-rending "Lawwwwwwwwd", the penultimate line of the poem, is the protracted pain of generations of sufferers whose affirmative voice the poet becomes in a single gesture of communal defiance' (Cooper, 1990, 8). Johnson's 'I' is likewise both individual and radically collective at the same time. 'The sufferer' is 'I' and it is 'you', it is one person and everyone. 'The sufferer' is both a specific Jamaican black identity, *and* a timeless, even biblical, character that transcends any particular racial or national identity. Johnson's writing therefore demonstrates how Caribbean poetry often explores universal experiences such as suffering, wrongdoing, and injustice from a highly located, particular, and culturally specific Caribbean voice, as Kei Miller's comments about Walcott also indicate.

Johnson's poetry speaks to the arguments of other African American thinkers in the 20th century through the belief that black struggle contributes to our understanding of *human*

rights. As I have argued, Johnson's poetry represents a form of black humanism: one that is based on the ideal that all humans are both the same *and* different. Nevertheless, I emphasise the former in this chapter because it is often overlooked by Johnson's reception. Du Bois' writing is one of the clearest examples of how 'the case' of black struggle is used to promote the ideals of cultural pluralism, democracy, and equals rights for all (Lawrence, 2011; Marable, 2015; Gates, 2014). Du Bois famously writes, as the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter shows, that the African American would never want to become completely Americanised because 'negro blood has a message for the world' (Du Bois, 2015, 5). In this way, Du Bois argues that the black experience, including all the suffering African Americans have endured, makes a profound contribution to our understanding of what it means to be a free and equal human being. Consequently, he makes the case that black politics, even when it is phrased in the most seemingly self-aggrandising or racially exclusive way, do not merely concern black people. The struggle for black liberation is a tale of human suffering that contributes to our understanding of human life: 'The history of the American Negro is the history of the strife – to this longing to reach self-conscious manhood' (Du Bois, 2015, 5).

Johnson similarly positions the Jamaican struggle as an existential struggle.

In Jamaican reggae the 'sufferer' refers to Jamaica's poor ghetto dwellers (Pollard, 1986; Ellison, 1985). Yet, Johnson also uses it to describe a general existential condition: 'a bitter existence in Babylon'. He describes it as carrying around a facial expression that looks like a 'permanent screw': 'this "blues" feeling, this inner agony, and outer look of dread' (Johnson, 1976, 401). In this way, the experiences of Jamaica's poor are seen as a prime example of the universal existential pain and suffering that characterises the human condition.

To be sure, the concept of universalism is, as I have indicated, highly controversial in the context of postcolonial literature: 'the assumption of universalism is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power because the "universal" features of humanity are

the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance' (Ashcroft et al., 2006, 71). Importantly, then, this chapter does not claim that the feeling of suffering and struggle portrayed in dub poetry is objectively universal; it claims that they are presented as universal *in* the poems and within reggae culture. Furthermore, I argue that Johnson's poetry takes inspiration from Du Bois' and the New Negro Movement's tendency to universalise the message of black music and art, and so participates in a black aesthetic-political tradition.

A central point that Du Bois makes in 'The Criteria of Negro Art' (1926), echoing Alain Locke in 'The New Negro' (1925), is that the American negro does not simply want to be accepted into the status quo. Instead, the negro wants to advance and help to build a better America, and even contribute to what Du Bois describes as the pathway towards the platonic ideals of 'beauty and truth':

> You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the seeing eye, the cunning hand, the feeling heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that – but nevertheless lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America (Du Bois, 1926, 779).

The aim of 'negro art', according to Du Bois, is to create a 'beautiful' world for 'ourselves' and 'all'. The emphasis on 'beauty', as both a feature of art and of social justice, illustrates the importance of aesthetics in his black utopian vision of the future.

Du Bois seems to think that black culture, and the 'sorrow song' of the negro spiritual more specifically, has a message that *can* be communicated to the world. This implies that there are communal messages, meanings, and sentiments that people can, under the right conditions, share beyond their ethnic and national identity. Of course, the message might not always be communicated, but its universal uptake is, in Du Bois' view, *possible*. This emphasis on sharing a message directed from black people to the world resonates with Johnson's descriptions of bass culture. What this reveals about Johnson's emphasis on the

‘sufferer’ is that, although the historical experience of Jamaicans is their own, outsiders can access aspects of this consciousness through reggae music.

As reiterated throughout this thesis, Brathwaite argues that the Caribbean poets should embrace their own positionality in the world. This does not mean that Caribbean poets should not engage with the world beyond the Caribbean. On the contrary, Brathwaite argues that it is only by articulating one’s own honest perspective that one can say something meaningful about the world as a poet (Brathwaite, 1984, 8). The 2015 Man booker Prize-winner Marlon James, a writer who often references reggae culture, demonstrates how reggae-inspired lyricism, and Caribbean poetry in general, rests on a strong conversation between the extremely local and the universal:

> But in another city, another valley, another ghetto, another slum, another favela, another township, another intifada, another war, another birth, somebody is singing Redemption Song, as if the Singer wrote it for no other reason but for this sufferah to sing, shout, whisper, weep, bawl, and scream right here, right now (James, 2015, 601).

In James’ writing, the individual voice is ‘right here, right now’, but it is concurrently in ‘another’ place. Reggae music can have significance for the ‘sufferah’ beyond its own locality and specificity. Johnson, alongside many other poets in the Caribbean poetic canon, addresses how poetry is inherently linked to dialect, speech, and voice. Caribbean poets, perhaps especially or most prominently Brathwaite and Walcott, explore how poetic utterance and speech emanate from real individuals who live and breathe in the world: ‘[…] the truest writers are those who see language not as a linguistic process but as living element’ (Walcott, 1998, 62). The voice, and poetry itself, are always directly or indirectly products of our individual consciousness, perception, place, tradition, and history. In this view, poetry is not necessarily always about ‘identity politics’, but it is always about identity and it is always about place.

If we look at some of the features I have discussed in this chapter – the concept of rebel music, ‘Third World’ experiences, gendered perspectives, and eschatological prophesy

– we see that dub poetry is characterised by its combination of located voices lamenting their marginalisation with the exploration of the universal experience of 'sufferation'. This combination of locality and universality is a result of the presence of locality dominating in some of these features and universality dominating in others. Yet, the combination continues to be registered, to various degrees, in all of these features. Although, this relationship between the particular and the universal can be said to describe many genres of poetry, or poetry as an art form in general, these questions are strikingly acute in the case of dub poetry. Dub poetry is a micro-genre located in a very specific cultural framework of Jamaica, reggae music, and even in the reggae sub-genre of dub. Yet, like dub music itself, dub poetry is ambitious in its attempt to say something about the human condition.

The current and future legacy of Johnson's work will depend on how these tensions between particularity and universality are interpreted, and what critics will choose to emphasise: Johnson *qua* the voice of Black British culture in 1970s, or *qua* the poet who used this specific framework to reinvigorate the core paradigms of Caribbean and black aesthetic traditions so as to redirect them to a new generation of readers and writers. Johnson's poetry reflects the Caribbean literary tradition and local British political interests and stylistic trends, while also engaging in a 'timeless' utopian black aesthetic tradition, in which dub music and Du Bois' conception of black arts are both important sources of influence.

Johnson's concept of bass culture, his key contribution to black aesthetics, attempts to conceptualise how reggae music, and Caribbean aesthetics more generally, can transcend these categories without abandoning them entirely. His poetry and its various tensions – between specificity and universality, politics and aestheticism, Caribbeanness and Black Britishness – shows us that few poets in the Caribbean canon better highlight a set of questions with both literary and political importance: Where does the Caribbean end? How far can the echo of black voices carry? Bass culture, describes dub, Caribbean aesthetics, and

black aesthetics more generally, as categories with a determinate content that are simultaneously open-ended and radically inclusive, and which continue to mutate into new forms through ongoing poetic production: 'songs of hope in suffering, songs of utter despair, songs of praise, songs of defiance, dread dub poetry, songs that speak of the historical endurance of the black Jamaican, songs that are as prophetic as they are true – such is the nature of the poetry of Jamaican music' (Johnson, 1976, 406).

4. Conclusion

it woz in april nineteen eighty wan
doun inna a di ghetto of Brixtan
dat di Babylon dem cauz such a frickshan
dat it bring about a great insohreckshan
an it spread all owevah di naeshan
it was truly a historical occayshan (Johnson, 2006, 60)

This thesis has proposed three perspectives on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry, perspectives that highlight different, yet closely interrelated, facets of his poetry. These three perspectives are: first, perspectives relating to the Caribbean literary tradition (chapter 1); second, to British reggae and punk subcultures (chapter 2); and, third, to Jamaican dub and reggae music (chapter 3). Throughout, I have tried to show that Johnson's poetry and criticism implicitly and explicitly considers the importance of aesthetic choices in the process of creating different forms of black political consciousness through poetry. I have tried to argue that these three angles help us not only to map the three main cultural strands that have shaped Johnson's poetry, but also to analyse how his poetry and criticism have self-consciously responded to them. His poetry recovers a Caribbean past whilst also voicing the Black British present, before turning to anticipate a different, 'dubwise' future.

Exploring these three perspectives, each chapter has at the same time assembled and tied together other relevant cultural sources that inform the poetry gathered under these respective headings. The first chapter on the Caribbean literary canon explored the influence of modernist poetry via the work of T.S. Eliot, as well as postcolonial criticism through the writing of Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott and Gordon Rohlehr. The chapter concluded that Johnson revives and readdresses the Caribbean canon's interest in authentic Caribbean voices, that is, voices perceived to be true to Caribbean cultures, as well as strategies such as the appropriation and juxtaposition of high and low cultures. The second

chapter covered the rise of British reggae and punk to explore the centrality of rude boy style, pop and performance poetry, beat poetry, British social realism, and related currents in post-war British popular culture, showing how Johnson's poetry forms a confluence of these different influences by creating a black new wave aesthetic. The third chapter looked at the influence of reggae and dub music and highlighted the importance of the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Movement and Rastafari mysticism in the shaping of Johnson's universalist and utopian sentiments, as well as his tendency to experiment with the relationship between introverted aestheticism and political commitment.

By bringing together these diverse dimensions of Johnson's work, the thesis has endeavoured to show how he is a more multifaceted, complex, and multi-layered literary and cultural figure and poet than his critical reception has so far acknowledged. Johnson's poetry weaves together a complicated web of musical, rhetoric, theoretical, political, and historical references and influences, and inherently forces us to interrogate the limitations of categorical distinctions between Caribbean literature, British literature, and Black British literature. In fact, Johnson's work straddles, challenges and undercuts all of these boundaries.

In the first chapter, I tried to demonstrate how Johnson's interest in the relationship between Caribbean aesthetics, on the one hand, and Black British politics, on the other, reintroduces and readdresses some of the core critical assumptions that underpin the post-war Anglophone Caribbean literary canon. His engagement with exploring the points of contact and divergences between these categories furthermore pushed Black British poetry in new directions. The Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) and its focus on trying to define a Caribbean aesthetic is particularly central to understanding Johnson's development of a self-conscious form of Black British dub poetry. In this sense, Johnson transmits this critical and formal project from the first generation of 'black writers in Britain' to the second generation of 'Black British' writers.

As this discussion showed, Johnson is a poet who influentially gathers together, absorbs, and re-actualises many of the central discussions about Caribbean perceptual models in poetry that are central to post-independence Anglophone Caribbean writing. As such, he is a transitional and mediating figure who thus helps us see a critical and creative continuity between Caribbean writing of the 1950s, '60s, and early '70s, and Black British writing of the late 1970s, '80s, and '90s, even as he also interacts with contemporary lyricism—a point on which I will elaborate towards the end of this conclusion. Johnson, and his reinvigoration of some of CAM's debates, allows for a fuller conceptualisation of the full scope of CAM's critical legacy from a contemporary perspective. It is through the public persona, popular impact and artistic production of Johnson that the ambitious nature of CAM's project was in some ways fully realised, even though other aspects – such as its ambition to breach the invisible barrier between the black cultural elite and the wider black community, and to subvert the difference between high and low culture – remain unfinished. Identifying some of the core aesthetic paradigms of the Anglophone Caribbean canon, and particularly CAM, therefore allows for a better understanding of Johnson's aesthetic and political project, while his poetry in turn offers insight into the content and meanings of these paradigms, as well as their limitations and continuing applicability.

In chapter one, reading the Anglophone Caribbean poetic canon through the lens of Johnson's poetry, and vice versa, allowed me to adapt and analyse Kamau Brathwaite's concept *perceptual models* as a critical lens through which the underlying conceptual 'essences' of the many varied and contradictory attempts to define a Caribbean aesthetic might be understood. By reading the Caribbean canon through Johnson's poetry, as well as reading Johnson's poetry through the canon, I have attempted to develop a better sense of some of the paradoxes and complexities of the word 'Caribbean' in the term 'Caribbean poetry'. Johnson's poetry is, like much Caribbean critical thinking, filled with creative

contradictions. Johnson follows the Caribbean canon's emphasis on Caribbean perceptual models in poetry by rejecting some of the allegedly typical tropical tropes of Caribbean poetry and including instead specifically British urban expressions, such as those relating to the punk and new wave aesthetic that were prominent in the years between 1974 and 1980, when Johnson published his core body of work. Johnson therefore draws attention to some of the complexities and difficulties, but also possibilities, of using 'Caribbean' as a literary category through his use of a recognisably Caribbean approach and attitude to create a specifically British reggae expression in his poetry.

The second chapter, which looked at Johnson's interaction with the punk and new wave movement, sought to show that Johnson demonstrated in these various ways why it makes sense to think of Caribbean aesthetics as not only a style, but also a *method.* Johnson's poetry conforms to a Caribbean aesthetic because he writes in nation language, uses reggae rhythms, and talks about the Caribbean and black struggle. But because of his location as a poet writing in Britain, his style is not enough to define him as a Caribbean poet in the true meaning of the word, according to Walcott's and Brathwaite's criteria for Caribbean aesthetic authenticity. Johnson's status as a true Caribbean poet is therefore equally defined by his willingness to experimentation with punk, his use of avant-garde strategies, and his development of his individual voice as, specifically, a Black British poet. Therefore a Caribbean aesthetic, according to this definition, is not just an ethnic or stylistic category. A poet's nationality or formal and thematic interests do not alone define their status as a poet writing from within a Caribbean aesthetic; just as important is the method that establishes the relationship between the poet's work and the poet's place. One of the limitations of the term 'Caribbean aesthetic', which Johnson's interaction with punk throws into relief, is if it is defined purely as method or style it can be so extended that it becomes meaningless. Yet, an ethnic or essentialist definition is equally reductive and uninteresting, and does not account

for its diasporic and multi-ethnic manifestations. Johnson offers us an excellent example of a Caribbean aesthetic practitioner because his work shows how these three elements work together. By highlighting the composite nature of the category of Caribbean aesthetics, he also helps us to see that a work of poetry can both be and not be Caribbean, according to the criteria one applies to it, and that ethnicity and nationality are often less important in these conversations in the Caribbean canon than we might assume.

Johnson's interaction with the punk movement, his creation of a punk-inspired black new wave aesthetic, and his further attempt to create a British reggae and dub poetry style distinct from its Jamaican origins, as discussed in chapters two, demonstrates the need for further comparative research about how Black British writing fits into the wider post-war British canon. Johnson's poetry incorporates cultural influences that have often been overlooked because they have been associated with 'white culture', and do not fit with his image as a polemical black poet. Johnson's similarity to some punk poets exemplifies that Black British poetry displays many of the same styles, approaches, and thematic tendencies found in what we would simply describe as post-war British poetry. These include social realism, anti-Thatcher protest, DIY poetics, and 'hard' anti-fascist rhetoric. We therefore have to be mindful of the themes and tropes that will be overlooked if we ghettoise Black British writing. The thematic similarities between Johnson and punk lyricism suggest that there are probably many other relevant connections between Black British and 'white British' writing that are deserving of attention. Any such future studies should ideally have a stronger emphasis on exploring formal, rather than primarily thematic, similarities than the scope of this thesis has allowed.

Johnson's interaction with the punk movement also demonstrates why it is useful to talk about Black British and Caribbean Literature as distinct categories of writing. By comparing Black British writing to other white post-war British writers it is possible to

develop a better grasp of the features that makes his Caribbean inspired poetry specifically British, as well as what makes him different from other British writers. Overall, Johnson shows that these categories, though not disposable, have to be seen as flexible. Critics must read across and adapt them in order to provide convincing and grounded interpretations of the literary material. Similarly, Johnson challenges the difference between poetry and music without wanting to dissolve these categories or create a complete mélange. He puts different categories into play at the same time, placing himself within the oscillation between media, genres, and traditions. A reading of Johnson's *oeuvre* that does not account for his interaction with punk, or other cultural influences that are not recognised as specifically black, would give a distorted, partial, and ahistorical reading of the work.

As the final chapter of the thesis attempted to explain, the core concept that grow out of Johnson's *oeuvre*, and perhaps his most important conceptual contribution to the study of Caribbean and Black British culture, is the concept of 'bass culture' – a concept that crucially synthesises aesthetic and political reference points. It refers to the sensory experience of bass and the cultural forms of being and becoming that this experience embodies. Though Johnson's poetry focuses on the immediate and sensory experience of dub and bass music, at the same time he portrays this individual experience as bringing with it a form of communal political consciousness or 'culture' between Jamaican and Black Britons into which others can be invited. Therefore, if the first chapter demonstrated that the notion of Caribbean 'perceptual models' was the main 'thesis' or point of view that Johnson inherited from the Caribbean canon, and if the second chapter then showed that Johnson also created a specifically British form of reggae and dub poetry independent of Jamaica, then the third chapter about bass culture provided us with a framework for understanding how Johnson's work ultimately has the power to forge a 'synthesis' of Caribbean and British culture, and of Caribbean and non-Caribbean cultures more generally.

Inspired by reggae lyricism and Rastafari belief systems, Johnson embraces activism and campaigning, as well as a more withdrawn, introverted, and mystic or quasi-religious approach to politics. Johnson emphasises the role reggae and dub plays in Jamaican and Black British identity politics and community mobilisation in particular, while also seeing dub as containing a universal and utopian message about the plight of the 'sufferer'. In this way, Johnson fluctuates between a group-based understanding of struggle by chronicling traumatic events in Black British history, on the one hand, and a universalist understanding of struggle by using an eschatological language that blurs the distinction between first- and second-person perspectives. The closing argument of the third chapter therefore hermeneutically returns the thesis to its opening premise: Caribbean poets have used Caribbean perceptual models rooted in Caribbean history and the region's environment to voice their own experiences, and by so doing they also say something about the world, about art in general, and about what it means to be a human being.

Throughout, this thesis also tried to offer a more general, meta-critical argument about Caribbean post-independence poetry and Johnson's place within the canon. In these terms, Johnson provides an illuminating example of how both Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean poets consistently engage with aesthetics in implicit ways, and also with *aesthetic theory* in explicit ways. While their interest in aesthetics, or in the meaning of formal awareness more generally, is frequently recognised, their interest in aesthetic theory as a field of philosophical enquiry is rarely framed in these precise terms. Brathwaite's concept of perceptual models is not only crucial to our understanding of how Johnson views the relationship between aesthetics and politics. It is also one of the most critically useful and intellectually interesting terms to have emerged from Caribbean literary criticism – one that could be productively drawn on by poetry criticism beyond the field of Caribbean studies. There is, however, surprisingly little written about this term and its implications; therefore

one future objective might be to theorise further and develop an understanding of Brathwaite's aesthetic theory. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite invites us to question more generally the relationship between sensory perception and political power. How can 'pure' forms become tyrannical? How can perceptual models marginalise? Poetic form is seen as shaped by society but, more interestingly and perhaps more originally, Brathwaite believes that poetics can in turn create or enhance societal change. As he writes, nation language is 'now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people' (Brathwaite, 1984, 13).

Brathwaite presents a way of thinking about the relationship between aesthetics and democracy that resonates with and compliments much contemporary theory on aesthetics. Brathwaite's writing about perceptual models, I argue, anticipates the interest in the relationship between democracy, art and perception that we find in Jacques Rancière's theories and those inspired by his ideas (Rancière, 2010, 2009, 2004).[169] Brathwaite and many other Caribbean writers are recognised for their contribution to Caribbean criticism and postcolonial criticism, yet they have also formulated aesthetic theories and general art criticism, that move beyond the fields indicated by these labels, and that are less commonly acknowledged. Not only does this reproduce a problematic dynamic where black thought and philosophy is overlooked, or only permitted to operate within certain cultural and critical contexts. It also, more obviously perhaps, impoverishes the field of aesthetic theory.

Brathwaite's interest in the relationship between aesthetics and democracy also correlates with what Johnson is trying to achieve in his work. Brathwaite and Johnson are in many ways describing a 'style war', where artistic equality is crucial to achieving equality between people: it depends on who has the right to define perceptual models, and what forms

[169] See also Thierry de Duve's 'Aesthetics as the Transcendental Ground of Democracy' (de Duve, 2015).

of cultural life are excluded by those definitions. These are questions Johnson engages with when he writes, ‘The “dub-lyricist” is the DJ
’ (Johnson, 1976, 398). He challenges what we define as poetry, who we define as poets, and which perceptual models we judge to be worthy of poetry. In this sense, he builds upon Brathwaite’s theory, as well on the writing of the New Negro Movement, and he gives the arts an important role in the fight against racism.

More research is required to map, gather and annotate the texts and writings in the Anglophone Caribbean canon and beyond that would allow for the development of what we might call Caribbean aesthetic theory and art criticism. These texts would naturally be interesting to Caribbeanists, but also to writers, critics, artists, and art historians working across a range of subjects. A good place to begin might be to collect Kamau Brathwaite’s critical writing into an annotated volume. Although Édouard Glissant has had a relatively wide reception, beyond Francophone Caribbean letters, there is a similar need for a single volume of his work that gathers together and translates into English his writings on aesthetics. Another important step would be to create an anthology of critical writing on the topic of Caribbean aesthetics, and frame the project not simply as an anthology of literary criticism, but as reflections on Caribbean aesthetics more generally. In addition to collecting these primary sources from the 1950s onwards, it would also be important to encourage innovative theoretical work on these text that interprets them in relation to contemporary Caribbean literary and visual art practice. The visual presentation, graphic design, and idea behind The Caribbean Artist Movement’s journal *Savacou* would further resonate with both commercial and avant-garde contemporary tastes, especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. The journal, and other similar books and artefacts, could be re-printed and re-marketed for both academic and popular audiences.

As outlined at the beginning of this thesis, the emphasis on the term *discourse* in Caribbean criticism perhaps fails to capture the important position that the arts hold in the Caribbean literary tradition. Caribbean poets and writers have often preferred the term aesthetics to other similar terms because it allows them to talk about sensory enunciations such as rhythm, bass, color, and visual image. These are common components of Caribbean art, which are neither primarily discursive, nor best described in those terms. Although the terms 'aesthetics' and 'discourse' also overlap in many ways, the latter has a stronger connotation to speech, linguistic, intellectual, or rhetorical communication. Shifting our attention from the term discourse to aesthetics allows us to more effectively decode and describe how Caribbean poets have attempted to create political, cultural, and artistic interventions through the sensory effects of art and literature. It also helps us to see why the arts have had a privileged place in Caribbean radical thinking and philosophy in comparison with other more empirically based forms of communication.

As I have attempted to show, Johnson is a poet who has grappled with the essential questions of aesthetic theory and literary criticism throughout his career by repeatedly asking the fundamental question: What is poetry? Yet, regardless of his contributions to creating the new genre of dub poetry and thus helping to expand our definitions of poetry, it must also not be ignored that Johnson is better known as a 'black poet' than as a poet who has contributed to our shared understanding of what poetry can be in Britain today. His reception has therefore highlighted some of the problems around how we tend to read poetry written by black writers. Johnson has commented on the obligation he felt as a poet in the seventies: 'I didn't believe that at that time a black poet could have the luxury of art for art's sake' (Prasad, 2002). 'Art for art's sake' was a luxury because of the constant discrimination against black people and the responsibility placed on the poet to address these problems, as his poems about police violence and the shutting down of sound systems illustrate. Kobena

Mercer has described this responsibility as the 'burden of representation' felt by many black and minority artists (Mercer, 1990).

Johnson has in recent years said that he would like to be considered *just a poet*, not a black poet, not a dub poet and not a performance poet (Wheatle, 2009). This is a sentiment he shares with a number of other black and minority writers. Yet he is still repeatedly placed within the categories of poetry that he has himself challenged. When we look at the reception of his work, we see that his claim to being treated as 'just a poet' is seldom respected, and therefore represents a privilege he has not yet had. Critics may continue to reinforce this lack of privilege and consequently turn it into a normative ideal for black writing, or view it as a burden from which they ought to be relived. The consequence of the latter view may be that one ends up questioning why postcolonial or world literature is viewed as a separate category of literature. Most critics working on black or minority writing are aware of some of the dilemmas of using a category such as 'black poetry' or 'postcolonial poetry' from an anti-racist perspective, and in regards to the autonomy and integrity of individual poets, yet my sense is that critics often feel that there are greater causes and benefits, such as institutional recognition, that justify these practice. We should ask ourselves more often whether these benefits and causes actually do justify our practices, or whether we are in fact disrespecting these poets by reading them in a way that perpetuates these difficulties.

Throughout the thesis I have tried to draw attention to new ways through which to read Johnson's multifaceted and complex points of reference. Even so, this thesis has almost inevitably fallen into the tendency of reiterating often repeated clichéd phrases about Johnson's 'blackness' and 'subversiveness' in order to make its case, although it has attempted to preserve critical distance from these at the same time. This critical distance has been maintained through an assessment of Johnson's work in the light of the traditions that inform it, and the archive of critical opinion in relation to which it has evolved. I have

endeavoured to acknowledge the wide cultural influences upon which Johnson draws so as to add complexity to our understanding of his rich body of work.

I have also tried to acknowledge that our view of Johnson's poetry will change as the world around it changes. This thesis is written from the perspective of someone who 'was not there', but who, given the politicised nature of Black British cultural studies and the institutional context in which it is written, is motivated by a responsibility to represent and communicate this history in an attentive way. For this reason, however, regardless of the relatively large body of research on the topic, the burden of representation can sometimes still be perceived to be transmitted from the poet to the reader. This sense of obligation and responsibility on the part of the researcher or critic might occasionally interfere with our readings of the material. Yet what I might perceive to be exciting about Johnson's poetry today might not be the same as for critics of other generations, working at a time when Black British cultural studies were ascendant in the 1960s and '70s. Although this thesis builds on this extensive scholarship, it also raises questions about how the history of Black British, literature, aesthetics, and politics will be told in the future.

Of course, it is important to conserve and respond to the rich Black British cultural archive and its existing body of criticism. But it is also imperative that we encourage readers of all colours, and from all kinds of cultural, political, and national backgrounds, to engage with this archive in new and creative ways, rather than perpetuating an intellectual climate of gatekeeping. The more varied the studies of Black British poetry, the less individuals will feel obliged to tell 'the' history in a neutral and even homogenized manner. One of the tasks in the future will be to stimulate critics to take greater risks when approaching the material, and to experiment more with their choice of critical perspectives and comparative evaluations, projects to which this thesis attempts to make a modest contribution. What the

legacy of CAM and the avant-garde impulses at work in Johnson's criticism certainly show is that this poetry should invite critical curiosity, experimentation, and risk.

I have presented some possible frameworks for reading Johnson's work, but, as I suggest, there are many more connections to be explored in the future. A topic urgently in need of further analysis is the place of dub poetry in the evolution of spoken word, slam poetry, and rap from the late 1970s and onwards. This is a connection that has regrettably been beyond the scope of this thesis. The relationship between dub poetry and these contemporary performance-based lyrical and poetic expressions offers an obvious, yet rarely conceptualised lineage. On the basis of the research done for this thesis, I would go so far as to suggest here that this probably represents the biggest knowledge gap in the study of dub poetry and Black British poetry today. I am convinced that more research into these connections, as well as on the continuity between dub poetry and the lyrical expressions of British rap and grime (the dominant cultural expression among young black people in Britain today), will yield productive results.

Johnson has emphasised that he was inspired by The Last Poets who came out of the Black Power movement (Caesar, 1996, 65). The Last Poets' songs, 'Niggers are scared of revolution' and 'Die Nigger', display a confrontational tone also found in Johnson's work. The Last Poets are also often seen as a precursor to rap. Don Letts' film about Gil Scott Heron, with contributions by the rapper Mos Def as well as Linton Kwesi Johnson himself (Letts, 2007, 232), for example, illustrates the close link between Johnson and the spoken word and rap tradition that might encourage other interesting exchanges about Johnson's poetry.

The writing of African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates also demonstrates why such comparisons will be essential to furthering our understanding of contemporary black Atlantic literature and black aesthetics in the years coming: 'the entire aesthetic of hip-hop is

sonic democracy. Basically any sound, anywhere, by any people, or anything is fodder for hip-hop. Nothing is too low-culture (Get R Done). And nothing is too high culture (Miles Davis)' (Coates, 2012). The emphasis Caribbean writers place on juxtaposing reggae and 'high culture', and contemporary black writers' emphasis on the value of hip hop, should be seen as a part of the same on-going discussion about the democratic and racial implications of subverting high and low cultural forms, as well as other taste distinctions.

Johnson has expressed concern that there is a disengagement between his generation and black youth in Britain today: 'I think there has been discontinuity in terms of the Black experience in Britain. It's like this new generation is starting all over again without a sense of tradition, a sense of what has gone before. And it expresses itself both culturally and politically' (Caesar, 1996, 72). The 2011 London riots, and the discourse around it, are comparable to the 1981 Brixton riots, though with key differences. Both were largely viewed as expressions of delinquency rather than political resistance by the political mainstream in their respective historical moments. However, because of the work of black activists and intellectuals like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Darcus Howe, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, a social and political discourse grew up around the 1981 riots, that raised contextual questions of marginalization and representation (Gilroy, 1982: Hall, 1978). Despite the similarities, it is harder to identify the relationship between the riots of 2011 and any organised or self-conscious political movement. It would therefore be too simple merely to dismiss the sense of discontinuity that Johnson observes, and why would we want to? Contemporary questions regarding social, cultural and political debates, in particular those relating to issues of race, should include asking what the breaks and continuities are between Johnson's generation of writers – and their cultural and political modes of expression – and young black culture in the UK today.

There is much at stake for the assessment of the aesthetic and political development in the years between these two crucial historical moments. David Starkey's now infamous and much criticised response to the August 2011 riots, in which he stated that 'whites have become black' by embracing 'gangster culture' and 'patois', shows that how we choose to narrate the evolution of Black British aesthetic and lyrical forms in the post Thatcher-era is a deeply political issue (Quinn, 2011). The idea that black culture in Britain is primarily represented by 'gangster culture' is not only the result of racial stereotyping, but is fundamentally *dehistorisising*. It erases black history in Britain before the late 1980s and early 1990s, before so-called 'gangster rap', guns and cocaine became more prominent features of Jamaican dancehall culture (Bradley, 2010). If we treat the legacy of the Caribbean Artist Movement and the black radical tradition in Britain as culminating in Linton Kwesi Johnson's work, rather than tracing it through and beyond his work into the future, then we are left with a decontextualizing and dehistoricising of black aesthetics in Britain that will have detrimental effects on our ability to have nuanced and historically founded conversations about the concept of 'black culture' and the role it plays in British society. It is therefore important that scholars contribute to making these conversations more constructive, rigorous and removed of bigotry.

Although Starkey's comments frame the concept of 'black culture' as purely negative and degenerating, and therefore build on many racist assumptions, they nonetheless reveal that the concept of 'black culture' in Britain is still seen as politically powerful. The irony is that Starkey's highly problematic attack in fact reinvests 'black culture' with a cultural and political significance, one that also needs to be recognised by scholars in the field who tend to overlook its wider aesthetic and political power through their intellectual and disciplinary ghettoisation. This recognition is especially important at a time when cultural studies as a discipline, and institutions for black publishing and art more widely, are suffering from the

decreased funding of the Humanities. How can this downgrading be justified while black culture in Britain is simultaneously seen as a driving social force that has the power 'to make whites black'?[170] Those encouraging and supporting black cultural expressions need to claim its political importance for all Britons, and highlight its transformative potential as a driving social force today. Indeed, if black culture is such a powerful social force – as many claim, from progressives to conservatives – then black aesthetics should be understood as one of the most important research eras in British Humanities for the future. That is, those who make claims about black culture and its social implications need to be able to distinguish dancehall from grime or hip hop.

Reggae and dub, the genres that represented young black culture and political struggle for Johnson's generation, have evolved into jungle, drum and bass, UK garage, and grime (Bradley, 2013). Do these formal and aesthetic shifts represent a change in political sentiment? How does this aesthetic and political transformation of black culture in the UK manifest itself in literary forms? What is the lyrical legacy of post-9/11 Black British cultural forms, and how can the work of Johnson and his contemporaries help us to identify these patterns? For Johnson, and the preceding generation, it was important to elevate black music and oral expressions into the realm of the literary. How does the grime and rap generation view the literary, and why have they seemingly been less interested in 'uplifting' black music to the status of poetry than previous generations? These are all imperative questions that new research initiatives into Black cultures in Britain need to explore. The first generation of Caribbean writers in Britain, and especially The Caribbean Artist Movement, as we have seen, provided a critical framework necessary to understand Johnson's poetry and to place it

[170] The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) closed in 2002. New Beacon Books, Britain's first black publishing house and bookstore, also home to the George Padmore Institute, had to in 2017 appeal for crowdfunding to save the shop and cultural hub from closure (Ashenden, 2017). The owner Sarah White states that in addition to the competition from Amazon, libraries and institutions are buying fewer books due to funding cuts. Online Source: http://www.thebookseller.com/news/afro-caribbean-bookshop-new-beacon-books-close-444436 [28.05.17, 20.31].

within the core aesthetic paradigms of black arts. In a similar way, Johnson's embracing of dub music and other so-called 'urban' musical forms may be crucial to our conceptualisation of the grime and rap generation in Britain that is dominant today. When the contemporary grime artist Stormzy sings 'Rude Boy, Shut up', and 'I'm so London/ I'm so south', in his song 'Shut Up', and Skepta declares that 'we don't care about your ism and skism' in 'Shutdown', the full meaning of these statements cannot be comprehended without knowing what came before: particularly the fact that south London, with the help of people like Johnson and his depiction of places like Brixton and Brockley, became an important part of the black cultural imagination in Britain, as well as how a skepticism of macro-ideologies was passed down from Johnson's generation to this one. Johnson, who actively embraced the perspective of the angry young black male in south London in the 1970s, is the poet of his generation who bears the most thematic and formal resemblance to the current rap and grime generation. It is time that we attempted to build the critical bridges that will connect these traditions and energies. As Johnson puts it: 'they can only be young in age/ but not in rage/ not needin/ the soft and shallow councilin/ of the soot-brained/ sage in chain/ wreckin thin-shelled words/ movin always fahwood' (Johnson 2006, 22). This effort to understand and define a Caribbean aesthetic that Johnson inherits from CAM is therefore an on-going and unfinished conversation, and it is also a crucial one. The project of understanding the evolution of black aesthetics and poetic forms in Britain from the 1960s and onwards is essential to our understanding of Contemporary British poetry, and the lyrical and rhetoric choices that writers of all ethnicities are making at the moment, either by absorbing, creolizing, or subtly rejecting (and yet still responding to) these Caribbean and black cultural influences.

During the process of writing this thesis, Stuart Hall, Darcus Howe, and Derek Walcott have sadly passed away. Johnson's role as a living poet, who is able to mediate

between generations, is therefore becoming increasingly important. Johnson is slowly becoming, both personally and formally, one of the few living and dynamic points of contact between the Windrush Generation and contemporary cultural life. Though there are many others who have similar positions, few have his standing and impact. Johnson, once the young rebel, is now becoming the grand old man of Caribbean and Black British literature. This will impact how critics read his work in the years to come, but it has also shaped and informed my attempts in this thesis to read his words from three perspectives, according to the agendas it has itself set, and the traditions with which it has identified.

Despite Johnson's relevance today, he is a poet strongly associated with the political and cultural climate of the 1970s. In the article 'A Smaller Sound, a Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry', Kei Miller argues that the heyday of dub poetry as a culturally important form has passed; the voice of dub poetry is not the voice of the present:

> LKJ often divides his dub poems into three decades. He will say, these are from the '70s, and then, these are from the '80s, and then, these are from the '90s. It is impossible not to note that we never get dub poetry of the new millennium as if even the poet laureate of the movement locates the genre in a time that has passed – as if even he is aware of the genre's death, or at least wary that the very attempt to protest capitalism was being put onto the production line (Miller, 2013).

This thesis has attempted to take a conceptual rather than a chronogical or biographical approach to Johnson's poetry in order to question how the genre dub poetry is typically defined and read. If one, as has often been the case, defines Johnson's poetry narrowly, engaged only with the black struggles and political concerns of the 1970s, then perhaps the genre of dub poetry, as well as Johnson's achievements, will be consigned to the past. Yet, if we acknowledge the inspiration Johnson took from reggae, and that the ideals of bass culture form a more politically ambitious, paradoxical, and utopian project, then there is much work left to do in order to perceive and understand the importance and influence of his contributions, and of the complex relationship between these different elements of his poetry. The ambition of this thesis has been to take some initial steps in that direction, which I hope

will initiate larger changes in the ways we approach black writing in the British Isles both today and into the future.

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Appendix

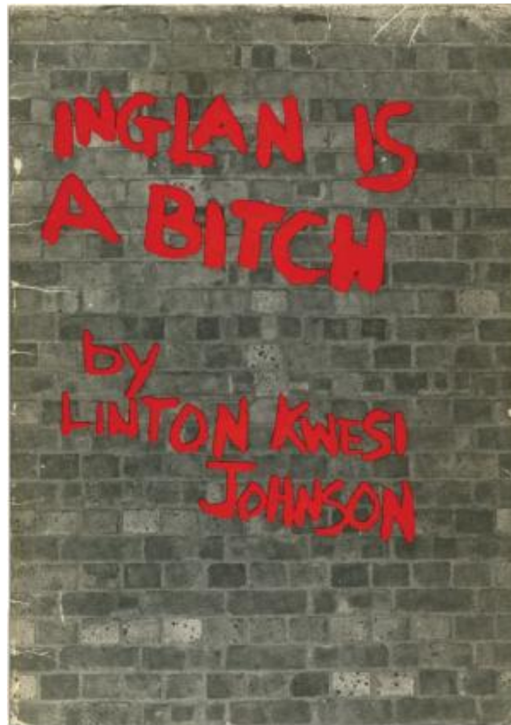

Figure 1, first edition of *Inglan is a Bitch* (Fey Chang, Race Today Publications, 1980)

Figure 2, The Stranglers, *Grip/London Lady* (photography by Chris Gabrin, 1977) and Big Audio Dynamite, *The Bottom Line* (photography by Daniel Donovan).

Figure 3, Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Cooper Clarke (photography by Chris Crask).

Figure 4, Screenshot from fan-video of ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ on YouTube with caption ‘England is indeed a Bi atch’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-LmEaHKk2I.

Linton launches LKJ Records — for poetry

INDIE OR NOT INDIE

THE FOLLOWING two facts are entirely unconnected. Fact the first: Linton Kwesi Johnson has declined to remain part of the Island Records roster. Fact the second: Linton Kwesi Johnson has just launched his own Rough Trade-distributed LKJ label, the first release on which should be available within a few weeks.

"I had a deal with Island for two albums," explains the noted disruptor of General Elections. "After making those two albums I decided that I didn't want to make another for a while, so I decided to take a break."

The new label is "something I've wanted to do for a long time to show other reggae artists what can be done independently and to try and point the future of reggae music."

Johnson is at pains to emphasise that he had no falling-out with anybody at Island, and that he still considers them to be "the best company around as far as the marketing of Jamaican music is concerned." Nevertheless, as he indicated in a recent letter to *Time Out* after that magazine quoted an Island memo directing the staff to stop work on Johnson's 'Bass Culture' album, he is dissatisfied about the support that he has received from the company. He is especially concerned that the main record shop in Brixton has been out of stock of his records for several weeks. "To be fair to Island, though, I understand that they have been having pressing and distribution problems with EMI."

The first release on the LKJ label will be a 12" single, topsiding an instrumental called 'Solitude' which features Rico, Dick Cuthell and some of the musicians who've contributed to LKJ's own albums alongside a toast from Brixton DJ Abubaka. On the flip can be found two poems by Jamaican poet Michael Smith: 'Me Can't Believe It' and 'Roots' — which originally appeared on a limited edition import.

Plans for LKJ are still fairly tentative, mainly because Linton doesn't have vast sums (or even medium-sized ones) of money to chuck around. The label is being administered by Dennis Bovell's Studio 80 organisation, and there's no clear policy about any set ratio of licensed JA material to home-generated sides. The label will, however, concentrate on "poetry rather than rhythms".

"This," quoth Johnson, "is a very necessary step for independence."

By CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY

Knock Knock. "Who's there?" Reggae. "Reggae who?" Reggaeny good books lately? Linton Johnson proves he's not such a dull old socialist after all. Drummer Vivian Weathers and guitarist John Kaipye choke with laughter. Pic: Alain de la Mata.

BENYON

...AN' HE CALLED IT TH' B.P.I.

T? TH'B.P.I WAS SET UP BY
ECORD COMPANIES T'
LE THEIR OWN AFFAIRS!

IND OF A CRUEL JOKE, EH?
AYIN' WITH Y'SELF RILLY DOES
AKE YA GO BLIND.

NME FACT!

One per cent of NME readers in the Norwich area have recently acquired a refrigerator

Figure 5, NME, 22 November, 1980

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