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Come Wi Goh Dung Deh: The Groundbreaking Dub Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson

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Abstract

In the second half of the twentieth century, the arrival of migrants from the West Indies to the British shores merged the English literary tradition with the exotic literary style of the Caribbean, resulting in a new literary movement in the island: Black British literature. The revealing works that this new generation of writers produced outlined the tensions of a period of racial discrimination and social instability in England. Among them, the most esteemed figure is Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose voice took the lead in the strife against injustice and brutality. Trained in the Black Panthers, Johnson combined traditional British rhyme patterns with a unique use of Jamaican Creole and reggae rhythms, constituting what he called 'dub poetry'. Despite his mastery, his work is absent from the mainstream study of English literature, probably becacuse of his radical spirit of battle against injustice.

Keywords: Dub poetry, Black British literature, Jamaican Creole, Reggae rhythm.

En la segunda mitad del siglo veinte, la llegada de migrantes procedentes del Caribe a las costas inglesas combinó la tradición literaria británica con el exótico estilo literario caribeño, dando lugar a un nuevo movimiento en la isla: la literatura afrobritánica. Las obras de esta nueva generación pusieron de manifiesto las tensiones de un periodo de discriminación racial e inestabilidad social en Inglaterra. De entre ellas, la figura más representativa es Linton Kwesi Johnson, cuya voz tomó el mando de la lucha contra la injusticia y la violencia. Instruído en las Panteras Negras, combinó la rima tradicional británica con un estilo inigualable de criollo jamaicano y ritmos reggae, creando lo que él mismo denominó como 'poesía dub'. A pesar de su maestría, su obra brilla por su ausencia en el estudio de la literatura inglesa, probablemente dado su espíritu radical contra la injusticia.

Palabras Clave: poesía dub, literatura afrobritánica, criollo jamaicano, ritmo reggae.

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1. State of the Art

One of the post-war consequences of World War II was the West Indian migration to the United Kingdom. During the conflict, many West Indian men were enlistees to the British Army or worked at war factories for the British Ministry of Labour, a fact which made them aware of the possibility to migrate to the United Kingdom and reach a higher standard of living. The testimonies of the first newcomers, who did not exceed a thousand per year before 1951, were favourable for subsequent generations of migrants. The first migration came with the arrival of the Empire Windrush, a cruise ship which brought one of the first large groups of post-war West Indian migrants from Jamaica to London in 1948. This was assumed to be the starting point of black people's presence in the United Kingdom (Kynaston, p.275). In 1961, around 50.000 migrants crossed the Atlantic, most of them from the West Indies Federation. As Davison indicates on Ter Heide (1992), in anticipation to a British immigration restrictive policy. The highest emigration rates correspond to the West Indian islands with less population, such as Montserrat, Dominica and St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla. In the case of Jamaica, its population was 1.606.546 in 1960, a quite high rate compared to Montserrat, with 12.157 inhabitants. Jamaican migrants were mainly young adults, being men and women almost equally represented (p.77). The low socio-economic activity of these territories, the widespread unemployment and the British welfare state were, according to Ter Heide (1992), enough explanation to the tendency to move to Britain, and the United Kingdom is, culturally speaking, not so dissimilar to the West Indies. Therefore, the situation was favourable for the West Indian population to migrate (p.79). However, Ruth Glass considers that the difficulties that awaited West Indians in Britain should not be underestimated: migrants had to acclimatize to a new weather; they had to adapt to the bureaucratic British welfare system; they had to move to urban areas after living in a rural environment and, in some cases, separate from their families if men preceded their wives and children; and finally, they had to face racial discrimination (p.82). To overcome these hurdles, they could resort to British organisations like the British Caribbean Welfare Service, established in 1956 (p.9).

With the coming of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of July 1962, these were required a voucher to be permitted to enter and work in the United Kingdom (Ter Heide, p.14). This measure came into effect to control the coming of migrants conforming to the country's capacity regarding social factors, such as employment and housing situation.

1.1 Sound System Culture

Jamaican newcomers who migrated to London brought multiple objects and forms of their cultural practice which would later enrich United Kingdom's culture. This was the case, grosso modo, of reggae music, the sound systems, and the carnival. These imports brought not only Jamaican life to England, but also its social concerns.

Sound systems were originated in Kingston in the 1950s. They appeared in ghettos and quickly became the principal context of musical activity and part of the cultural identity of Jamaica (Prahlad, p.7). According to Big Youth, a famous Jamaican disc jockey, sound systems became a social movement, for they were an anti-establishment channel to communicate with the people in the street (Marre, 2011). They consisted of an analogical music player, such as a turntable or a gramophone, attached to a set of speakers by which a DJ selector played music. They were either mounted on lorries to organise events in the street or located at dancehalls in town. According to Clinton Hutton (2007), DJ selectors were characterised by having a charismatic appeal, the skill of timing, oratory, poetics, and an improvisational and extemporaneous disposition (p.17). These often diverted into dub lyricists who brought the spoken word closer to the people, creating a kind of oral poetry and lyrical expression about everyday events and the changes in Jamaican society. They were a 'New World update to West African oral traditions' (Appiah, p.461). Fred D' Aguiar (2006) argued that it was the slow and repetitive bass line of reggae music what invited DJs to launch their didactic and eye-opening lyrics over the music. (p.ix). The words dub lyricists concocted were spontaneous, improvisatory and had a musical base (Morris, p.93). The reverse literary genre was dub poetry, a term coined by Linton Kwesi Johnson to define what he and other poets were doing at the time. Dub lyricists departed

from the backing track and improvised the lyrics to fit the music, while dub poets composed the music out of the musicality of the spoken word, a technique on which both words and music were an integral part of each other (Rosso, 1979).

According to Johnson (1976), when musicians compose the music, they themselves enter a common stream of consciousness, and what they create is an invitation for their listeners to enter in that consciousness. In his own words: "The poetry of Jamaicans laments the suffering of the 'sufferers' but also asserts their strength and their determination to struggle on relentlessly" (p.398). The term 'dub' comes from 'drum and bass' music. The music portrays the sufferers of today, and the term 'dub' represents an African feeling. Johnson stated that all have Africa within them and all can feel it (p.400). The lyrics are written in first person and tell an individual experience which is in turn the experience of them all, and together with the music, they take listeners to the very depths of their being. Linton Kwesi Johnson considered this lyricism the imagery of fire and blood (p.405). He stated that Jamaica, although being a 'Caribbean island paradise in the sun', is one of the most violent places in the world, and the bass and the drum of the music represent the city's grounded heartbeat (p.401). Another important aspect of dub music lyrics is the concept of *Babylon*. In Rastafari religion, the African equivalent to the Jewish diaspora are the exiles living in Babylon, i.e. in the Western world (Singh, p.20). Thus, Afro-Jamaicans compare themselves to the Israelites, and their biggest desire is to liberate themselves from oppression tearing down the walls of Babylon (Johnson, p.401). In his 1976 article on volume 17 of the magazine Race & Class, Linton Kwesi Johnson opined the following about the role of lyricists:

> Over the last decade, the main preoccupation of the lyricist has been the burning social, political and economic issues of the day. In commenting on these issues, the lyricist makes a vital contribution towards the oral documentation of the history of Jamaica and to the Jamaican oral tradition. 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 (p.412).

Together with Jamaica's independence from the United Kingdom, in 1962, came the popularisation of ska music, conceived as a 'reactionary response to the neo-colonial control of Jamaican airwaves' (Prahlad, 2001). Some Jamaicans considered that culture was as important as politics 'in terms of impacting movements for justice, rights, and independence' (Freeland, p.6). Artists portrayed Jamaica's struggle for independence in their works and erected a solid artistic network in the island. Furthermore, in 1959, the cultural leader Norman Manley formed the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation as an alternative to Radio Jamaica, controlled by the British. The JBC emitted local music like mento and early ska. The development of the arts provided a source of resistance for Jamaicans, and ska music contributed to the empowerment of nationalism and identity (Freeland, p.6).

Reggae music acted as a link between Jamaican street culture and that of young Afro-Caribbean blacks in Britain, and permanently changed the content of black culture in the country (Pryce, p.37). Its lyrics unified black people to hurdle black community's global struggles (D'Aguiar, p.x). Jamaican reggae was exported to England as 45s and landed in south London record shops, where black and white youths could purchase it. Subsequently, this influence contributed to modify British musical tradition, and, on the one hand, reggae bands like Steel Pulse and Aswad emerged in the national music scene (D' Aguiar, p.x); on the other hand, it influenced white British post-punk bands such as The Police, The Clash and Madness, who incorporated rhythmic and sonic elements from ska and reggae into their music (Spencer, 2011).

The Notting Hill Gate Carnival, considered Europe's biggest street party, began in the city of London in 1966. It has come to reflect the delicate relationship between the British established order and the Afro-Caribbean youths. Music takes an important role in this celebration, specifically reggae music, which symbolises resistance against the forces of order. In the 1960s, the organization was in the hands of two white English neighbours of Notting Hill: Rhaunee Laslett-O'Brien and Anthony Perry. It first began as the Notting Hill Street Festival, portraying the organiser's vision of black British society as that of passive,

fun-loving people (Pryce, p.1). In 1974, Jamaican activist Leslie Palmer took charge of the event and gave it a new cultural orientation. He had been involved in the cultural sphere of West London and transformed the Carnival by drawing people from all the West Indian islands and getting the local council to lease him amplified sound systems. He even got a patronage from Capital Radio, a national radio station listened by many of Britain's black youths, which transformed the it into a mass activity (Moore, p.148). However, this mass influx spoiled the good relations between the police and the Carnival organisers (Cohen, p.70)

1.2 'Inglan is a Bitch'

Black British literature originated together with the British Empire. Writers like Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, both from the 18th century, criticised the abuses of the British troops through a first-person perspective (Wambu, 2011). After the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948, Britain had lost a significant part of its global hegemony, and those who arrived in the ship would later write about the change in attitudes during the post-colonial era. Jamaican writers James Berry and Stuart Hall were some of the first intellectuals who migrated to England. They had already studied British writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen and Blake in Jamaica, so they were familiar with Britain's manners and culture (Wambu, 2011). Regarding the promotion of culture, the BBC broadcasted a radio programme about Caribbean literature called Caribbean Voices since 1946. It helped launching the careers of many writers who would later move to Britain.

One of the themes Black British writers dealt the most with was the struggle of Caribbean locals in their countries of origin. For instance, George Lamming's 1953 novel *In the Castle of My Skin* tracks the life of a boy who takes part in the rise of organised labour in the colonial country he lives in. As time went on, literature started to centre in the challenges migrants had to face when arriving to England, like Samuel Selvon's the *Lonely Londoners*, published in 1957. During the revolutionary 1960s, the American Civil Rights Movement affected Black British literature. In Britain, the Caribbean Arts Movement was set up in

1966 to cover the issues of Caribbean artistic identity and politics, creating the basis for future publishing houses and book stores. Houses like Race Today promoted black writing and proclaimed the emergence of the voice of a new generation (Wambu, 2011). These times were also witness to the works of some women who wrote about their role in British society as black female, such as Buchi Emecheta and Beryl Gilroy. In the case of Farrukh Dhondy, she wrote children's books about multi-racial England (Wambu, 2011). In the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson, he was part of a generation of writers who began through poetry to express his frustrations and complained about not being accepted in Britain.

1.3 A Poet from Chapleton

Linton Kwesi Johnson creates poetry by intertwining politics, art, and the production of the self. He is recognised as one of the earliest and best-known dub poets. His poems portray the struggle of black people in England in the political and the cultural spheres and invite to fight against the oppression of hegemonic power. His concern about tyranny connects him with other African-descendant writers from around the globe, sharing a common voice despite being separated geographically, linguistically, culturally, and temporally (Melgarejo, p.100).

He was born in August 1952 in Chapleton, a small market town which belongs to the parish of Clarendon, Jamaica. His parents moved to Kingston when he was seven years old to try for a financially better life in town. Then, they migrated to England, leaving him with his grandmother (Stewart, p.69). In 1963, when he was eleven, he came to London and went to Tulse Hill comprehensive in Brixton (Markham, p.249). According to him, for any black child coming from the Caribbean and entering the British school system, whether at primary or secondary level, they are at a disadvantage. Not because of a language problem, for English is spoken in the Caribbean, but because at that time, racism was rife within the British school system, and West Indian children assumed they were less intelligent than white children. However, Linton considered that Brixton had the feel of Kingston, and growing up there did not take a long acclimatisation process (Rosso, 1979). This London

district initially impressed him, as the market had the Caribbean spirit and he could hear his own Jamaican dialect in there (Stewart, p.69). Later, in 1973, he studied sociology at Goldsmith's College, University of London. After leaving the university, he joined the Black Panther Party of England and organised a poetry workshop within the movement (Markham, p.249). There, he acquired an ideological discipline and a political channeling of his energies. Furthermore, he had access to the Black Panthers library, where he discovered a book he considered 'the catalyst of his awakening consciousness': *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois. This book served to him as a bridge to discover the Black Power movement in the United States. (Stewart, p.70)

His first publication came in Race Today, a political journal involved in the black movement, and in 1974, Race Today Publications labelled his first volume of poems: *Voices of the Living and the Dead*. It was made public first the preceding year as a dramatic representation of Keskidee Community Theatre Workshop, at Keskidee Centre in London. This centre served to black unemployed youths living in London to catalyse their artistic and literary output (Stewart, p.71). The following year, *Dread Beat an' Blood* emerged as his second publication, also giving name to his first LP record, released by Virgin Records in 1975. A third book came in 1980 by Race Today: *Inglan is a Bitch*. His latest book, *Tings an Times*, was published in 1991. He has appeared in performances and public readings in more than twenty countries outside England (Stewart, p.69).

2. ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’

In an interview published in 1989, Linton Kwesi Johnson stated the following: “From the moment I began to write in the Jamaican language, music entered the poetry. There was always a beat, or a bass line, going on at the back of my head with the words” (p.253). This idea is at the basis of all of Johnson’s creations. However, it is not sufficient only by reading the poems to perceive their musical features, as these are not completely transmitted to the reader in written form. One should listen to the music versions to perceive their complexity. The editorial director of Carcanet Books Michael Schmidt, though an admirer of Johnson's recitals, considers that his work is not a literary but a performance poetry classic, and that it is best captured on CD or video rather than on paper, a medium where it cannot thrive (Jaggi, 2002). Quite the opposite to Robert J. Stewart’s arguments (1993), who states that, when the poems are adapted to a musical version, their strong rhythm is forced out of its aural shape to conform the music, instead of the opposite way, consequently causing the loss of power in the written form of the poems (p.82).

The poems that are studied in this paper are taken from Penguin’s *Linton Kwesi Johnson: Selected Poems* (2006). It contains the most popular and polemical poetry of the author and classifies it into three decades: “seventies verse”, “eighties verse”, and “nineties verse” (Saroukhani, p.258). It does not have an overt editor, which, according to Henghameh Saroukhani (2015) is not unusual in a Penguin Classics book; and it contains few footnotes throughout the text as part of its paratextual additions (p.263). This collection first appeared by the title *My Revalueshanary Fren,* published by Penguin in 2002, by which Johnson became only the second living poet to have his work published in Penguin Modern Classics. The other poet was Czesław Miłosz, who passed away in 2004. This has been his last publication so far, and, in a recent interview with *The Guardian* in April 2018, Johnson confessed that he has not written a poem in more than a decade. He argued the following:

> “It’s because it has occurred to me that maybe I’ve written the best of what I can write already. I’ve known so many poets who have peaked at a certain period in

> their career, and then they've written inferior stuff in the years after. I don't want to be that guy." (Aitkenhead, 2018)

Nevertheless, his publication as a Penguin Modern Classic became controversial to *The Times Literary Supplement*, griping that some readers would find the ushering of Linton Kwesi Johnson into the circles of the immortals a little premature (Robinson-Walcott, p.51). Other detractors coincide with Saroukhani's arguments, who considers paradoxical that, departing from a global success emanated from a relative commercial independence and from the commitment to local communities and issues, Johnson's poetry got published by Penguin and thus being exposed to a loss of purpose and appeal. But before judging the incorporation of Linton Kwesi Johnson to the label, it may be necessary to consider what the aim of Penguin Books has been along its history: making cheap editions of good-quality contemporary writing (Saroukhani, p.259). In addition, Johnson himself considers that books should be both readable and accessible, opposing to the inaccessible nature of elitist classical literary tradition. In his own words:

> "If I'm going to write poetry about the experiences of black people, then ordinary folk, like my mother, should be able to pick up one of my poems, read it and understand it without having been immersed in the classical tradition" (quoted in Saroukhani, p.261).

Therefore, Linton Kwesi Johnson's incorporation to Penguin Classics may clash with what can be expected from an anti-establishment poet, but it sure democratises the access to his poetry while expanding its boundaries.

His works have been translated to German and Italian, and he has performed in Europe and Japan. Fred D'Aguiar, professor of English at the University of Miami, considers Johnson "the most original poetic form to have emerged in the English language in the last quarter century" (Jaggi, 2002). He puts him in a radical tradition and compares him to Swift, Shelley and Clare; a return to the poet on the front line. According to him, Johnson was the

first to give voice to the "second generation" of black Britons - children of Windrush-era post-war West Indian migrants. Maya Jaggi (2002) considers that Johnson's poetry collections, *Voices of The Living and The Dead*, from 1974, *Dread, Beat an Blood*, from 1975, and *Inglan Is a Bitch*, from 1980, marked the harsh coming of age of a generation for whom they became anthems. Concerning music, Barbados-born musician Dennis Bovell considered that the combination of poetry and music of performance poetry was a "vehicle for bringing in a wider, young audience" (Jaggi, 2002). With the Virgin album *Dread Beat an Blood*, from 1978, and Island Records' *Forces Of Victory* and *Bass Culture*, from 1979 and 1980, respectively, his fame surged amid reggae's rising popularity, and riding on a punk-reggae "anti-establishment" coalition, he opened for punk groups, such as Johnny Rotten's PIL (Jaggi, 2002). These records are still popular and they are available on the online music platform Spotify. Writer Caryl Phillips considers Johnson "the first crossover voice, who made it possible for a generation to think of themselves as black and creative in literature, music, the media". For him, there was nobody else articulating what was going on in the streets of Britain for young black people. (Jaggi, 2002).

3. Dub Poetry's Inner Core

3.1 Language and Diaspora

Traditionally, oral forms of language helped to transmit the myths, history and legends of the communities. According to Jamaican poet Michael Smith, orality was key in terms of the preservation of native culture as many people could not read and write (Markham, p. 277). In the colonies, the embrace of the settlers' culture entailed the displacement of the oral tradition and contributed to the creation of pidgins that fulfilled the linguistic necessities of those who did not share a common language. Pidgins would subsequently evolve into Creole languages, which spurred the preservation of orality and questioned the assumption that literature had to have the standard form of a European language to thrive (Patke, p.96). According to Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1984), the English language that settlers introduced in the colonies began to be influenced by Creoles, and Creole languages transformed themselves to new forms brought from the European languages and their cultural imperatives. This phenomenon lasted in what he called a 'nation language' (p.311). He equated it with Dante Alighieri's preference for the Italian vernacular over the imperial Latin of thirteenth century Europe. Together with Édouard Glissant, he defended the Creole writer's conspiracy to conceal meaning and liberate language from the conventional norm of linguistic transparency.

The complex sociolinguistic history of Jamaica has produced, according to Manuela Coppola (2013), a linguistic variation characterized by gradient transitions from English as the 'acrolect' through an intermediate range called 'mesolect', to the broadest Creole or 'basilect'. Mesolectal and basilectal forms are used for rhetorical purposes to construct a public persona/identity, or to make a political statement by writers who would have been able to produce a Standard English alternative (p.8). The spelling system of Jamaican Creole written format is based on a modified Standard English spelling, an easier practice than adopting a completely different system (p.11). Jamaican writers are familiar with the written conventions of Standard English, as it is their first literacy. Thus, it is easier for

them to modify the spelling system than having to adopt a different one (Coppola, p.10). This is also the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson, who, conscious of the syntactic, lexical and phonetic differences between Standard English and Jamaican Creole makes an intentional use of Jamaican Creole in his written compositions (p.16). Concerning the target readers, they are expected to be familiar with Standard English, too, and to the sounds of Creole, so that they can retrieve the rhythm despite the visual proximity to Standard English (Coppola, p.11). These sounds constitute the creole identifier as a few phonetic spelling variations are necessary to suggest dialect in writing. According to Mark Sebba, spelling alterations are often the product of deliberate choices creatively deployed by writers in order to reinforce the message conveyed by the use of Creole through an ideological use of orthography (Coppola, p.13). As a social practice, orthography is affected by ideological implications and, in the case of dub poetry, is aimed at achieving "maximal differentiation" from the Standard (Coppola, p.15). Mark Sebba notes that symbolizing difference from Standard English may be more important than signaling sound (Coppola, p.18). Dub poets were aware of the danger of proclaiming a supposed 'standard Creole', as well of the risks of turning textualization of Jamaican Creole into a tool for fixing its written conventions. As if, In Coppola's own words (2013), "to resist any claim of authenticity or 'correctness', dub poets thus constantly displaced their text and their voice" (p.18). The *soi-disant* standardisation of Creole would limit the capacity of distancing Jamaican Creole from the orthography of Standard English (p.10).

His compositions evolve along time in terms of the use of Jamaican Patois, beginning with a wider use of Standard English in his seventies verse: "Chocolate hour an darkness creeping night" ('Dread Beat an Blood', line 3); and experiencing a posterior creolisation in his eighties and nineties compositions: "Dat wi naw tek noh more a dem oppreshan" ('Di Great Insohreckshan', line 15). This revolutionary poetic style was considered by writers like Caryl Phillips the harbinger of a generation of writers who began "to feel free to use patois, nation language, whether from an ethnic group or regional background". Others considered it "a uniquely British form of language coming back home, changed", in the literary critic Ellah Allfrey's own words. (Jaggi, 2002). Fred D'Aguiar (2006), in his

introduction to *Penguin Modern Classics: Linton Kwesi Johnson,* says that the English language used by Johnson is seasoned by Jamaican creole and extends the range of the poet's palate with a certain directness, viscosity and muscularity of creole verb forms and compound words (p. xi). Johnson's style has an important use of phonetic spelling of the English language. Coppola (2009) suggests the following about how Jamaican Creole modifies the phonetic characteristics of Standard English:

> The plosives /d/, /t/ instead of British English fricatives, as in: *dem, wid, ting, mout*; half-open monophthongal vowels are used in words like *make* (mek), *say* (seh), *go* (goh), *no* (noh), where British English has diphthongs. The presence of a glide /j/ after velars and /w/ after bilabials, when a low vowel follows: *cyaan*/*kean*, *bwoy*; loss of final consonant in clusters: *bes'*, *an'*; velar plosives /k, g/ in medial positions where British English has alveolar /t, d/: *miggle*, *lickle*; the non-pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ (*start*, *turn* and *mother*) is signalled as: *staat*, *tun, maddah* for *start, turn, mother* (p.14).

Given these aspects plus the syntactical guidelines of Jamaican Creole on John Holm's *Comparative Creole Syntax* (2007), the following fragments of the poem 'Come Wi Goh Dung Deh' are approached according to them:

> "Come wi goh dung deh / Mek wi tek a ride dung deh" (1-2).
>
> Di people dem a fite
> Oppreshan dung deh
> Di people dem a fite
> Fi dem life dung deh (37-40).

In the first line, "come" is the dominant verb and indicates 'motion towards'. The verb "goh" is the final element after the dominant verb and precedes a locative "dung deh"; in terms of phonetics, it has a monophthongal vowel where British English has a diphthong:

"go". In line two, the verb 'make' is changed into a half-open monophthongal vowel "mek", and the line ends again with the locative "dung deh". In line thirty-seven, the definite article "de" is accompanied by a post-nominal "dem", which functions as a plural marker in basilectal Jamaican Creole (Holm, p.143). Preverbal "a" is a progressive aspect marker. In line thirty-eight, the fricative / ʃ / in the word 'oppression' is changed according to its sound to 'sh': "oppreshan". In line fourty, "fi" is a prepositional element followed by a prenominal, possessive adjective "dem".

Coppola (2013) states that Johnson often represented the fricatives or / ð / respectively through the /t/ or /d/ sound, as in think/tink; this/dis, etc. An example of non-standard spelling used for words where the sound in question is similar in Creole are the re-spelling of "you" as "yuh", "yu" or "y'u" (p.17). He also uses /k/ rather than /c/ even when the change is not functional to signaling a different sound in Creole. As a consequence, writing "catch" as "ketch" is a powerfully symbolic rejection of standard norms rather than just an attempt to visually represent a Creole sound. The wide range of variants in Jamaican Creole demonstrates the intention to remark the "independence of Creole as a separate language from English" (p.15). Johnson heavily relied on the flexibility of the modified Standard English spelling, dismissing any claim of 'authenticity' or 'correctness' and resisting the notion of a standardized orthography to which he should conform his writing. Coppola argues that variation is an intrinsic feature of Jamaican orthography, stating that the Dictionary of Jamaican English provides different spelling variants of the same word in its entries (p.14).

This phonetic use of English was not well received by many sectors. Jamaican Patois and phonetic spelling of words were considered by many a means of rebellion for the black British youths. The Spectator magazine was appalled about it, arguing that he was helping to create a generation of "rioters and illiterates" (Aitkenhead, 2018). However, others had a closer position to what Brathwaite and Glissant defended in terms of Creole language. Ferdinand Dennis said: "At school, you were made to feel ashamed of your language. But when you heard Linton Johnson you became aware of its power, that it was something to be

proud you owned, as well as standard English" (Jaggi, 2002). And for David Dabydeen, Johnson's was a "unique marriage of Caribbean Creole and black urban patois; a defiant, unapologetic assertion of black language as a mode for poetic expression". (Jaggi, 2002). Thus, Johnson's poetry, besides giving voice to British black youths, made a transgressor use of Jamaican Creole that has constituted the pride of multiple generations.

3.2 'If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet'

Instead of using an iambic rhythm for the prosody, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant advocated for the utilisation of the intonation and rhythm of calypso. Both considered this a requirement for the decolonising function of Creoles to prosper (Patke, p.98). Brathwaite considered that "the hurricane does not howl in iambic pentameter", comparing decolonisation with this destructive meteorological phenomenon from the Caribbean (Jaggi, 2002). I found coincidences between his ideas and the reasons Rhian Williams gives to the use of free verse, stating that "such defiance is attractive if you associate rules with repression and, for many early free-versifiers, this attitude was necessary if art was to be rescued from lazy and servile patterns" (p.124). Their doctrine was in total opposition with Claude McKay's intention of being indistinguishable from its European models, who willed to forsake the natural rhythms of his birthplace. Nevertheless, Patke (2009) remarks that McKay was 'betrayed by his speaking voice' as, in his recordings and performances, he pronounced 'the' as 'de' (p.99).

Linton Kwesi Johnson also opted for Brathwaite and Glissant's idea of how a poem should be composed. In his introduction to Penguin's *Linton Kwesi Johnson: Selected Poems,* D'Aguiar (2006) states that Johnson's poetry maintains a reggae rhythm and a regular iambic mostly tetrameter line-beat, and its lines use to begin with a trochee. Concerning rhyme, he states that his rhyme scheme locks to a few word sounds and endings (p. xi). My own analysis of Johnson's poetry confirms this aspect. Each of his compositions has a different and repetitive rhyming pattern regardless of themes and motives. There are poems

where he uses couplets like in the first stanza of the poem ‘Yout Rebels’, where we can find these rhyming couplets:

> Breakin away
> Takin the day,
> Saying to capital nevah
> Movin fahwod evah. (4-7)

There are others where the same rhyme is repeated monotonously throughout the entire stanza, as in ‘Di great Insohreckshan’ and ‘Inglan is a Bitch’, where there is assonant rhyme in every line:

> It woz in April nineteen eighty wan
> Doun inna ghetto af Brixtan
> Dat di babylan dem cauz such a frickshan
> Dat it bring about a great Insohreckshan
> An it spread all owevah di naeshan
> It woz truly an histarical occayshan (1-6)

> 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 (1-4)

Other poems combine slant and identical rhyme. This is the case of ‘Forces of Victri’:

> Wi mek a likkle date
> Fi nineteen-seventy-eight

An wi fite an wi fite
An defeat di State
Den all a wi jus fahwod
Up to Not'n' Hill Gate
Den all a wi jus fahwod
Up to Not'n' Hill Gate (5-12)

These rhyming patterns provide musicality to the reading process and contribute to the richness of Johnson's poetry.

In terms of structure, these poems contain plenty of instances about the freedom of the poet to arrange words in them. Rhian Williams (2009) sustained that, departing from the arrangement of words according to the poet's desire, poetry can result in creations in pursuit of image and expression (p.126). This is the case of stanzas like the sixth in 'Five Nights of Bleeding', characteristic for the emphatic position of the term "broke glass" throughout the poem and for the variation of length in its lines:

Night number five at the telegraph
Vengeance walked through the doors
So slow
So smooth
So tight an ripe an smash!
                    Broke glass (61-66)

Johnson also plays with length and position to capture imagery and movement. In the poem 'Beacon of Hope', the variation in the length of lines illustrates the slow movement of sunset in the following excerpt:

The sun fades slowly
Behind the distant hill
    Falls
    Beyond
    Today's
    Horizon
Signals the twilight of your dawn (5-11)

There is another remarkable example in the poem 'Tings an Times', in which Johnson speaks of a man who is "dizzied, dazed, traumatized" and portrays it with the arrangement of the following stanza, appearing several times throughout it:

Fi days
    Upan
        Days
    Upan
Days
    Upan
        Days (33-39)

He makes frequent use of onomatopoeia in several poems. He represented with words the sound of reggae music in the poems 'Reggae Sounds' and 'Bass Culture', two works that illustrate his theory of socio-political realities "affecting and being affected by the shifts of Jamaican music" (Stewart, p.78):

"SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK! / What a beat!" (Reggae Sounds, 52-53)

“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” (Bass Culture, 1-5)

This visuality is only noticeable if the poems are printed. The lack of an official orthography of Jamaican Creole gave writers the opportunity to experiment with the print medium. According to Coppola (2013), dub poetry is characterized by the impossibility to provide an identical performance of the same text (p.13). The interaction between oral performance and the written medium poses problems both in terms of word spelling and in terms of graphic representations consistent with the reading, such as line breaks, italics or different typographic characters. According to Coppola (2013), creating a version of Creole in print requires using an “eye dialect”, a sort of altered spelling which focuses on pronunciation (p.10). These issues lasted in the ‘Savacou debate’, a discussion about printing poetry. It appeared as a result of the publication of an anthology called ‘New Writing 1970’ in the journal *Savacou* as a double issue written by Laurence Breiner. It discussed what should be printed and how a poem should look on paper. Laurence Breiner referred to the problematic use of Creole in published poetry. Coppola suggests that the crucial question of how the oral performance should be reproduced in written format also involves “the typographic representation of a language that does not have an official orthography, thus weaving together issues of literary canons, language and spelling standards, and national identities” (p.11). The printed version of the poems co-exists with that recorded on audio, and with the many versions from the live performances, and every dub poem in fact boasts a variety of versions (p.13). Coppola states that, thus, every text always changes not only in the variability of oral performances, but also in the various spelling of the written text (p.11).

In terms of rhythm, it should be acknowledged that the educational system of the different Caribbean territories did not recognise Creole languages, prioritising British literature and

English in schools. This should be the reason why Linton Kwesi Johnson's prosody contains many instances of English poetry feet, such as iamb, trochee, anapaest, and dactyl. In the lines of the poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding', from *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, these feet are present. However, Johnson's poetry is written mostly in free verse and most of its verses are irregular, avoiding a mechanic and uninteresting structure. In stanza four of the same poem, there are two regular and two catalectic iambic tetrameters:

> "Inside James Brown was screaming soul / Outside the rebels were freezing cold (37-38)
>
> The song of blades was sounded […] / An two policemen wounded" (44 & 46)

The first two lines are regular iambic tetrameters with meter U / U / U / U / and the other two are catalectic iambic tetrameters with meter U / U / U / U, lacking a syllable at the end. Other examples of classic feet are line three trochaic trimeter with meter / U / U / U "Right outside the rainbow" and, in stanza two, the anapaestic trimeter with meter UU / UU / UU / of "Was a beating out a rhythm with a fire". In the latter, the repetition of the article "a" three times exhibits Johnson's dexterous poetic style. These feet reinforce the message of the verses, putting a rhythmic emphasis on words.

3.3 'Reggae Sounds'

In terms of musicality, the rhythmic patterns in the works of Linton Kwesi Johnson are closely linked to 4/4 dub music bars, coinciding with D'Aguiar's statement about the reggae rhythm that we saw before. In his book, Patke (2009) illustrates this idea of rhythm and music strengthening Johnson's poetry with the first stanza of the poem 'Di Great Insohreckshan', present on his second book of poems and first LP, *Dread Beat An' Blood*:

> It woz in April nineteen eighty-wan
> Doun inna di ghetto of Brixtan

Dat di babylan dem cauz such a frickshan
Dat it bring about a great Insohreckshan
An it spread all owevah di naeshan
It woz a truly an histarical occayshan (lines 1-6)

He states that dub poetry "makes words come off the page and move to a beat learnt from music" (p.103). This aforementioned musicality is clearly visible in fragments like the first lines of the second stanza in the poem 'Forces af Victri':

Wi mek a likkle date
Fi nineteen-seventy-eight
An wi fite an wi fite
An defeat di State (lines 5-8)

Brathwaite also assessed this "riddimic aspect of Caribbean nation language" in performance poetry, considering that, when it is in written form, this type of poetry loses part of its meaning (p.312). Linton Kwesi Johnson considered that he learned a lot from the DJs but distinguished between the practice of poetry, even when performed, and the art of the DJ (Patke, p.101). The rhythm in the poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding' is characteristic for being that of the sound-system reggae, and it serves as a soundtrack to the events that happen in the poem's narrative. Regarding its diction and syntax, it is written in Standard English, although Jamaican Creole slightly emerges in some of its lines (Stewart, p. 74):

It was a soun shaking doun your spinal column
A bad music tearing up your flesh
And the rebels them start a fighting
The yout them jus turn wild (lines 17-20)

I examined the different feet of Johnson's poetry together with how they were performed on the records and became aware of the tight bonds between music and prosody. In some poems, he puts a pyrrhic verse standing in anacrusis one beat before the following stave of the music, like in the last lines of the first stanza in the poem 'Bass Culture':

> "An is a whole heappa
> Passion a Gather
> Like afrightful form
>   Like a righteous ham" (lines 14-17)

In other cases, the stressed syllables of the verses coincide with the rhythmic base of the music, comprised of bass guitar and drums; and the harmonic base, comprised of guitar and piano, is of syncopated or *off-beat* nature, meaning that, in the four beats that form a 4/4 bar, these are displaced to the middle of the second and the third beats and to the middle of the fourth and the first beat of the following bar. With the following stave, I illustrate this scheme comparing the music version to the fourth and the fifth lines in stanza four of the poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding':

Inside James Brown was screaming soul   Outside the rebels were freezing cold

The stressed syllables of each verse and the rhythmic base appear together where the quaver rests are on the stave.

4. ‘Bass His'try is a-Hurtin' Black Story’

Immigrants from the West Indies had to endure a social situation in England that was not welcoming for them, in Johnson’s own words: “It was a myth that immigrants didn’t want to fit into British society. We weren’t allowed”, (quoted in Aitkenhead, 2018). These people were alienated because they did not find any solace neither in the return home nor in exile. His poetry is based on the tensions of a period of upheaval seen through the eyes of the black community and embraces every repressed West Indian immigrant. His view of politics and *sowshallism* took an international dimension as he got aware of the black struggle in America and the Caribbean. Although his verses explore the local quarrel of Britain’s black working class, his call is international and clamours for the union of writers from all over the world under the equalising rubric of equality and justice for all (D’Aguiar, p. xiii). Ferdinand Dennis, author of *Behind the Frontlines* and *The Last Blues Dance*, sees Johnson as a bridge between Caribbean and black British culture:

> He borrowed Rastafarian forms to express alienation, pressure, the lack of direction of the first British-born generation in the 1970s and the attempt to contain them by the forces of law and order. Here was somebody who had his finger on the pulse; you sensed he was experiencing the same pressures his poetry expressed (Jaggi, 2002).

The absence of a wide range of paratextual elements on the Penguin Classics edition as well as the plain dating of the poems, classified only into three decades, can be interpreted as Johnson’s intention to lend these fragments of black British history to those suppressed internationally, no matter the epoch, so they can identify their grief with what is being told. Saroukhani (2015) discusses its international relevance reflecting on his 1998 concert in Paris, France. In an interview with Caryl Phillips in 2001, Johnson stated that oppressive governments, racist attacks and police violence are issues that speak to a global audience.

And he considered that his call for a committed black British community invites the international audiences to appropriate the front lines of black Britain onto their local and national terrains (p.257). The poem 'Mi Revalueshanary Fren' reveals this international call to the masses moving beyond black Britain and showing Johnson's interest on international socialism:

> Mi revalueshanary fren is nat di same agen
> Yu know fram wen?
> Fram di masses shittah silence-
> Staat fi grumble (1-4).

Later in the poem, Johnson mentions the communist leaders of Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Romania, emphasising their disappearance from European politics:

> Kaydar
> E ad to go
> Zhivkov
> E ad to go
> Husak
> E ad to go
> Honnicka
> E ad to go
> Chowcheskhu
> E ad to go
> Jus like apartied
> Will av to go (11-22).

In Johnson's poems, these harsh situations are told through the voice of a poetic persona whose identity is marked by the linguistic choices of the author (Coppola, p.15). This voice

is doomed and isolated due to being cursed by its social status. The reader glimpses the ideal social landscape this persona evokes and aims. However, a sense of solidarity with the black community is apprehended from it, embracing all West Indian immigrants who suffer. The poem 'Voices of the Living and the Dead' gives a glimpse of this. In it, Johnson speaks about his blood relatives unified by a hereditary cause who share with him the same 'wounded Black body'. It was written as a homage to the ancestors of black history and literature, inscribing them in the framework of world history (Wójcik, p. 11). The same notion appears in 'Come Wi Goh Dung Deh'. Speaking of no West Indian island in particular, its social demand could be applied to any West Indian immigrant with a similar experience (Stewart, p.78). The songs speak of the situation of those West Indians who cannot find food, work, *sheltah*, or mercy in their home territories, having to fight against oppression:

> Di people dem a fite
> Oppreshan dung deh
> Di people dem a fite
> Fi dem life dung deh (lines 37-40)

Another example of Johnson's interest about black community's solidarity appears in the poem 'Inglan is a Bitch'. It tells the story of a person who moves to London and labours in several low-standing workplaces without any appreciation by the white British society, tolerating a wide variety of discomforts:

> Well mi dhu day wok an mi dhu unite wok
> Mi dhu clean wok an mi dhu dutty wok
> Dem she dat black man is very lazy
> But if yu si how mi wok yu woodah seh mi crazy (lines 33-36)

Ten of the poems from the Penguin Classics collection relate to people or institutions in particular. Seven of which are elegies dedicated to someone cherished by him or relevant to the black community's struggle: 'Five Nights of Bleeding' is written in memory of Leroy Harris, victim of internecine violence; 'It Dread Inna Inglan' is dedicated to George Lindo, wrongly condemned of armed robbery; 'Reggae Fi Radni' is dedicated to Guyanese political activist Walter Rodney, who was assassinated; 'Di Good Life' is dedicated to the memory of C.L.R. James and John Holness, Trinidadian and Jamaican activists; 'Reggae Fi Bernard'is written for Bernard Burnett, mysteriously hit by a train whilst standing on a platform at a railway station, probably shoved; 'Reggae Fi May Ayim' is dedicated to May Ayim, mixed-race German poet, activist in the black German movement; and 'New Craas Massakah' to the memory of fourteen young blacks who were assassinated at a birthday party. The other three poems change into a different mood: 'Bass Culture' is dedicated to Big Youth, a famous Jamaican DJ; 'Forces of Victri' is dedicated to the Race Today Renegades and to the Notting Hill Carnival Development Committee, who are put as the cornerstone of the libertarian black British movement; and 'Beacon of Hope' is written to John La Rose, founder of Beacon Books and mentor of Linton Kwesi Johnson. Caryl Phillips emphasises the deeply personal subtext of his poetry, arguing that Johnson is just bringing to the surface his passion for people (Jaggi, 2002). One of the poems is an epistolary 'anti-suspicion poem' against the Vagrancy Act, a law that led to disproportionate arrests of black youths: 'Sonny's Lettah'. Its poetic voice is that of a son writing a letter to his mother from a Brixton prison.

Johnson has published just a couple of non-socially-oriented poems throughout his whole career. One of them is 'Loraine', which does not appear in Penguin Classics. It is a lyrical-satirical composition about the complexities of man/woman courtship with a frivolous tone (Stewart, p.83). It clashed with the typical socially engaged theme of reggae poetry and music. In Johnson's own words, "reggae wasn't just about love songs but society and spiritual nourishment" (Jaggi, 2002). This one has not transcended as much as the other poems. The other is 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', on which Johnson reflects on the literary

canon and the ‘top-notch’ poets who belong to it. Although he does not consider himself one of those poets, he uses their rhyme and rhythm.

In terms of symbolism, for the poet and novelist David Dabydeen, professor of Caribbean studies at Warwick University, Johnson "captured a deeply disturbing sense of dread and violence, with images of broken glass, blood, bleak oppression". (Jaggi, 2002). The poem ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, aforementioned in section 3.2, contains the term “broke glass” displaced to the right, thus acquiring a sense of emphasis. This displacement provides the poem a new significance, as it reveals a sentiment through the structure of the poem. In the case of the term ‘blood’, it is used to refer to two different entities: either to the red fluid, as in ‘Time Come’: “Wi goin smash di sky wid wi bad bad blood” (16); or to the brave young blacks who fight for their class’ rights, as in ‘Yout Rebels’: “Young blood / yout rebels” (18-19). It is interesting how these evocative violent words appear almost entirely in the nineteen poems of the ‘seventies verse’ section of Penguin Classics (2006), and scarcely in the following ones. These 1970s poems were published during a period of upheaval for black youths in England. Thus, Johnson was resorting to these terms to evoke a violent environment in the minds of the readers while denouncing injustice. The following eleven poems of the ‘eighties verse’ section are more optimistic. Despite describing class struggle and conflicts, they do not contain such kind of vocabulary. The only exception is ‘New Craas Massakah’, a poem that tells how fourteen young blacks were killed and twenty-six were injured in a racially motivated arson attack at a sixteen-year-old birthday party. The ‘nineties verse’ section has ten poems of which two are exceptionally about violence: ‘Liesense fi Kill’, about police brutality in England and its consequences. In it, Johnson makes an allusion to the British secret service with *liesense fi kill* the enemies of the state, mocking the fictional figure of James Bond: “Yu tink a jus hem-high-five an james ban” (14); and ‘New Word Hawdah’, about the victims of genocide in Rwanda and Palestine. The latter enables discerning Linton Kwesi Johnson’s veneration for international socialism and for solidarity among the international community.

In short, the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson evolves in terms of theme together with the ongoing social situation of the blacks in England. Beginning with the convulsive 1970s and the riots in Brixton, captured in Johnson's raw vocabulary, and following with the 1980s and 1990s of Cold War, unflinching Thatcherism, and inequality.

5. Conclusion

The aspects presented in this dissertation demonstrate the literary quality of Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry in terms of the following criterion: rhyme, rhythm, musicality, language, and theme. His contribution to British poetry deserves a close reading and an attentive listening. Instructed under the frame of traditional British literature, Johnson combined English poetry feet and syncopated reggae rhythms with unrivalled smartness, which reinforced the message of his verses and put a rhythmic emphasis on words. The variety of rhythmic patterns he employed was closely linked to 4/4 dub music bars, and its use provided musicality to the reading process and contributed to the richness of his poetry. Due to the tight bonds between music and his poetry, some considered that the printed medium made Johnson's poetry lose part of its meaning. However, its visuality is only noticeable if the poems are printed. The sharp verses of dread and suffering which emanate from his poetry broke the rules and spelling of Standard English and shaped the language into a voice of denounce, making an impeccable use of Jamaican Creole. Its aim was achieving a maximal differentiation from the Standard English form and avoiding the standardization of Jamaican Creole, making an ideological use of orthography. His linguistic style evolved along time, beginning with a wide use of Standard English in his seventies verse and an increasing evolution to Jamaican Creole in the eighties and nineties. The phonetic use he made of Jamaican Creole constituted the pride for multiple generations. In terms of theme, his poetry exhibited the tensions of a period of upheaval seen through the eyes of the black British-born generation in the 1970s and their attempt to free themselves from the forces of law and order. He got influenced by the Black Panther movement, where he acquired ideological discipline and discovered *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, a book he considered the catalyst of his awakening consciousness. His word was entrusted to those whose voice was silenced, portraying the struggle of black people in England in the political and the cultural spheres, and inviting to fight against the oppression of hegemonic power. His deep commitment with the black British offspring of the Empire Windrush of 1948 and with those who suffer around the world gives an insight of his endorsement to international socialism and social equity. In

these terms, his voice of denouncement seems to have been uncomfortable to the British society since he started articulating what was going on in the streets of Britain for young black people.

Despite having been published by Penguin Classics, facilitating the access to his poetry and expanding its boundaries, he has suffered the lack of recognition by the literary canon of English literature throughout his whole career. His work can lead to further research in numerous dimensions. It can be studied in relation to those Caribbean poets who migrated to the United States and how both currents resemble. It could also be approached regarding how W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* influenced Johnson's way of thinking as both writer and Black British activist. Thus, Linton Kwesi Johnson's work constitutes a significant part of Black British literary culture, as it narrates its social struggle with the British establishment. Therefore, his literary legacy cannot be ignored.

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