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1. The echo of the past

Since "the etymology of diaspora suggests both routes (scattering) and roots (sowing)" (Procter 2003: 14), Afro-Caribbean and Black British dub poets, as represented by Jamaican-born Linton Kwesi Johnson, take heed of their artistic and anthropological ancestry, emphasising their shared Africanness. Individual aesthetic choices and philosophical differences notwithstanding, these poets both write back to the grand narrative of the British Empire, "provincialising Europe" (Boehmer 2007: 5) and in consequence acting as Afro-cultural guardians who, while "interrogating and revising the global map of contemporary modernity" (Boehmer 2007: 5), privilege African retentions and the history of the Black Atlantic. My paper is therefore an attempt to take a closer look at select African elements prevalent in Johnson's early poetic output, namely his first two collections: *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) and *Dread Beat An' Blood* (1975). Though still to a degree present in Johnson's later publications, such as *Tings an Times* (1991), Africanism is supplanted by the poet's

involvement "in a discourse of documentation" (Procter 2003: 94) of the toils and tribulations of the Black diaspora in the UK.

Born "in August 1952 in Chapleton, a small town in the rural parish of Clarendon, Jamaica" (Johnson 1981: IV) and raised in "a very poor [Afro-Jamaican] peasant family" (Morris 2005: 84), LKJ attended Tulse Hill Comprehensive School, Brixton, London in the 1960s. Then – "[a]bout '69, '70," as Johnson recalls, he "began writing poetry" (Morris 2005: 86) and commenced the formative process of cultural discovery: "I didn't know there was such a thing as black literature. I mean, I thought books were only written by Europeans. And I came across this book and began reading it – by W. E. B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk" (Morris 2005: 86-7).

Having completed his A levels as well as desiring "to express and say something about what was going on in England with young people, and how black people were treated" (Morris 2005: 87), LKJ went on to study sociology at Goldsmith's College, London in 1973. It was at that time that his first poems were featured in the *Race Today* journal, which subsequently published the poet's debut collection *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974). His second book, entitled *Dread Beat An' Blood* and published by Bogle L'Ouverture – another seminal Black British printing press of the 1970s, followed in 1975.

Prior to establishing himself as a trademark protest poet in the late 1970s and early 1980s, LKJ made his literary debut as an Afrocentric playwright in 1974 – apart from two poems that close Johnson's first book[1], *Voices of the Living and the Dead* contains solely the title play,

1 These are "Youth of Hope" and "Five Nights of Bleeding". The poems both seem to constitute poetic analyses of the aftermath of the colonially-inflicted "common hurt" (Johnson 1988: 34); both appear to be transporting the Black Atlantic rebels of "Voices of the Living and the Dead" to the twentieth-century of "cs gas" (Johnson 1988: 35) and "ritual[s] of blood in a blues dance" (Johnson 1988: 38) where – with a varied degree of success – they continue their ancestors' fight against the establishment. Despite its Black Atlantic themes and post-colonial concerns, "Voices of the Living and the Dead" serves also as a universal poetic treatise on rebelliousness, ethnic and/or class strife, the perennial clash between the ruling elites and the subjugated masses and, consequently, following into the footsteps of one's militant forebears.

which to this day remains the poet's only ever published one. "[F]irst played at the Keskidee Centre, Islington, in June 1973" (Johnson 1988: 7), "Voices of the Living and the Dead" places "emphasis on violent insurrection, with all the Fanonist undertones, sens[ing] accurately the events which tore at the guts of British society in the summer of 1981" (Johnson 1988: 7). Heavily influenced by surrealist Negritude aesthetics (King 2005: 108), the text is an example of the poet's early 1970s interest in the repercussions of the Middle Passage: the fate of enslaved Africans and their revolutionary endeavours.

Consequently, what emerges in his first collection of poetry as LKJ's prime concern is not African mythology but its silenced history. Not unlike Mutabaruka, Johnson plays the role of a historian chronicling Black experience and inscribing the Africans on the framework of world history, as opposed to the restrictive rubric of Third World history. In this sense, select texts by Johnson concern African ancestry, emphasising Black people's "anciency" (Prahlad 2001: 11). Intended to be performed with the accompaniment of "drums, bass guitar and flute" (Johnson 1988: 9), the play is composed as a dialogue between the quick and the dead, commented upon by the narrator and reverberated by the figure of Echo. "Voices of the Living and the Dead" brings the overshadowed colonial lesion to the limelight, laying bare the ghastly wound of/on the collective Black body, voicing the joint guilt of erstwhile empires:

> 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
>
> DEAD On the sacred breast of silence. (Johnson 1988: 9)
>
> (...)
>
> LIVING These my many comrades dead
>
> As stiff as steel [that killed them] they lay:

> Bodies littering this forest
>
> like discarded autumn leaves (Johnson 1988: 15).

The memories of the atrocities of yore have obliterated the language of today, suffusing it with the lexis of conflagration: "There is no love no more/in emotive words .../only fire..." (Johnson 1988: 9). The sentiment (resentment?) is amplified by Echo and reiterated by the Narrator who draws a visual parallel between quotidian atmospheric conditions and remembrance, between nature and human nature: "Smoothly does the moon beam flow/from a circle of love in the sky/from a circle of blood in the sky" (Johnson 1988: 11). The vermilion streak of sunset, being tantamount to the hectolitres of blood spilt in the wake of conflicts and conquests, de-romanticises nightfall, rendering it the time synchronised with the netherworld: "Gentle is the coming of the breeze/as it squeezes through trees and leaves/singing a song for the living and the dead/and death is the scent in the air (...) Came death as the darkness gathered/Death came as the sun slipped away/Came death in the twilight of the evening/Death came as the day went its way" (Johnson 1988: 11-13).

For LKJ, night is the time dedicated to the deceased – those annihilated as a result of colonisation (including those perished in the wake of centuries-long transcontinental slave trade and anti-slavery/anti-colonial resurrections in the New World and Africa); it is the period devoted to their memory as well as their memories, transmitted posthumously: "Listen to the voice of him who is dead/the echoes are the voices of the far-off dead" (Johnson 1988: 13). However, nightfall – being the time for nocturnal rest and life-enhancing slumber – seems ideally suited to stealth insurrection. Under cover of foreboding darkness, the Living, whose anger is stoked by their former glories: "and our eyes blind...blind/to all but the enemy (...) I ran gun in my hand (...) at this most sacred hour./Then the banks of the river/of rage exploded.../Then blood began to flow" (Johnson 1988: 18-9), agitatedly arm themselves with intoxicating aural incantations: "Words of warmth make my head mad/with voice

and voices echoing/making a ring of truth around the sound" (Johnson 1988: 23).

The imminent confrontation, which is clearly the product of righteous indignation, stemming from the perusal of the past (the plight of the demised) and the present-day pitfall of the disenfranchised sufferers, battling against economic decrepitude

> In the markets
>
> flies had taken to the food
>
> In our houses
>
> cockroaches had taken to our beds (Johnson 1988: 23)

will subsequently result in unprecedented, though portended, bloodshed. "Truth is the seed long planted" (Johnson 1988: 29), reiterates the Echo, "[i]n the most fertile of soils/The harvest is soon to come" (Johnson 1988: 29).

The harvest, construed as the espousal of Black Power revolutionary tactics, jointly prophesied by the personae of Johnson's play, is that of the most blood-red kind. Johnson's brothers in arms, blood relatives, both past and present, unified by hereditary cause – "Your cold flesh will be fashioned into coffins/for our now burning flesh/and togetherness will be firmly established./All rebel flesh is one flesh" (Johnson 1988: 31) – are destined to find prospective solace: "LIVING At what place will our meeting be my brother? DEAD We will meet in the laughter of children's eyes" (Johnson 1988: 33). Nevertheless, as the Living proclaim, "until then more blood .../ECHO BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD!" (Johnson 1988: 33). Until, it seems, world history is rewritten by the victorious living and/or until eternal peace is attained by the dead.

2. The voice of the present

Johnson's debut remains his sole avowedly Afrocentric output. In his subsequent collections, such as *Dread, Beat an' Blood* (1975) or *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980), Johnson refocuses his poetic lens so as to magnify the then-overshadowed present-day vicissitudes that befell

the representatives of the Afro-Caribbean (and Asian) ethnic minorities. The persona of an African historian and a chronicler of Afro-rites gives way to both a citizen-journalist and a social activist who fashions himself as an advocate of participatory democracy. As a result, the collective memory of colonial history and the immigrants' non-European origins becomes less pronounced, however, it remains overtly referenced in a number of Johnson's poems either centering on/epitomising or alluding to Afro-Caribbean cultural practices. As a first-generation immigrant of West Indian ancestry, LKJ makes conspicuous use of his homeland's aesthetic capital. Jamaican roots reggae, vintage dub, ska (and occasionally Trinidadian soca) are Caribbean catalysts behind LKJ's writing. As such, his poetry of social protest relies on reggae-specific rhythms/cadences, as manifested in Johnson's texts such as "Bass History" and/or "Reggae Sounds", reggae-associated language (patwa, Black English) and contains numerous thematic references to reggae songs and/or motifs. After all, "[m]usic is our first [native] literature and culture" (Dawes 1999: 194), asserts Jamaican-born poet Rohan B. Preston in the introduction to his debut collection *Dreams In Soy Sauce* (1992).

In LKJ's poetry, reggae acts as a cultural intermediary between Afro-Jamaica and the UK. Johnson the poet casts himself as an advocate of the reggae tradition, an Anglophone Caribbean envoy who, in his own words, "heard it [the songs and performances of fellow Jamaicans such as U-Roy, Big Youth, King Stitt and Prince Buster] as poetry" (Wheatle 2009: 38). These patwa lyrics of popular rocksteady and early reggae songs impregnated adolescent Johnson with the

> idea of what the real African tradition was, in terms of telling the story of the tribe. (...) they [roots reggae musicians] were also producing a very incisive commentary about what was happening at the time in Jamaica or society or in the world at large. For me it represented a new form of poetry and I wanted to write poetry like that. I didn't want to be a DJ. I wanted to draw upon my Jamaican heritage, use the everyday language of Jamaican speech [as manifested by reggae lyricists] (Wheatle 2009: 38).

Therefore, by tapping into a vast reservoir of reggae, Johnson fashions himself as a curator of Jamaican music; his poems, though set in the UK, include transcontinental references to, borrowings from and snippets of Jamaican roots and culture lyrics. These intertexts, which are points of LKJ's cultural compass, have been present in his poetry – have been "coming down his reggae reggae wire" (Johnson 1988: 36) – since the publication of his debut book of verse, yet it was his second collection that gave prominence to the rootsical, to the reggae-driven, becoming "indicative of a wider 'reggae culture' in its use of a reggae rhythm, Rasta lexical items and allusions to Reggae DJs" (Donnell 1996: 367). In "Street 66", a 1975 poem that tells the story of a private reggae-infused party about to be interrupted by the overzealous police, Jamaican music – a cornerstone of "the particular Blues Party culture of 1970s Black Britain" (Donnell 1996: 367) – plays the role of one of the identity-shaping shields that protect the diasporic Blacks from the repercussions at the hands of Babylonian forces, embodied by the local constabulary. This is how LKJ himself recalls his 1970s Ledbury Road, off Notting Hill Gate, denizenship: "Occasionally the police raided us, claiming to be looking for runaways, and didn't leave until they'd provoked someone into the kind of anger which led to an arrest" (Phillips 1999: 286).

As the get-together taking place at Street 66 commences – "de room woz dark-dusk howlin softly/six-a-clack" (Johnson 1975: 19), the revellers are spiritually fortified by the sounds from the Caribbean – "(...) muzik mellow steady flow,/an man-son mind jus mystic red,/green, red, green ... pure scene" (Johnson 1975: 19) and the uplifting words chatted over a recognizably reggae riddim by "de mitey poet I-Roy [who] woz on de wire" (Johnson 1975: 19). The empowerment reaches its zenith when – conspicuously buoyed up by the camaraderie, dancing and other party-specific "culturally encoded practices" (Procter 2003: 69), Western[2], the principal character of the

2 Clearly, the name is a pun – an altered version of Winston, which was a popular name given to Jamaican boys in honour of Churchill, as well as an ironic remark regarding Western's not being originally a member of the Western/European society.

poem – "him feelin I-ry, dread I" (Johnson 1975: 19), declares his staunch antagonism toward any police officer that trespasses on the West Indians' personalised territory. As James Procter observed, "[i]t is the emigrants here who become the insiders in an underworld whose sanctity is threatened by the [predominantly] white policeman, an outsider in this new Caribbean enclave" (Procter 2003: 39).

Western's ominous threat – "any policeman come yah/will get some righteous raas klaat licks,/yea man, whole heap a kicks" (Johnson 1975: 19), is verbalised through the colloquialism of Jamaican patwa, not devoid of the authoritativeness of straightforward vulgarism[3] as well as the playfulness of a musical double entendre. Apart from being a harbinger of Western's pugilism and a physical expression of his endeavour "to assert [on behalf of fellow blacks] the right as individuals in Britain" (Futrell 1979: 10), "a lick", construed as a short phrase or riff in music, serves as an indication of the sonic Other that the encroaching officers are about to experience.

Similarly, in "Problems" (1975) – a poem that opens with an epigraph culled from Jamaican Horace Andy's roots reggae song, it is Afro-Caribbean music and genre-specific conscious lyrics that inspirit the enfeebled diaspora the poet single-handedly addresses: "an dont let noh problems/get yu doun/cause they will put yu in a hole" (Johnson 1975: 51). Roots reggae songs "serve functions of social critique and deconstruction, inspiration, and guidance and are based upon the idea of meditation as a precursory ritual to social action" (Prahlad 2001: XXI). Consequently, Johnson's text, together with its mandatory imagery of fumigating fire – "fire fe dem tail!" (Johnson 1975: 50), exhortatory phrases – "FARWUD!//dig-up de dus/kick-up a fus (...) tek dem in de dawn/tek dem in de nite (...) DO IT! (...) an yu gotto be bold/if yu wanna save yu soul" (Johnson 1975: 50-1) and a vision of victorious enlightenment/rebirth – "rise an site/de lite"

3 "Raas klaat" is a Jamaican compound expletive, in which "raas", though literally means "buttocks", "is more often used (...) in an exclamatory way to show strong opposition" (Cassidy 2002: 372), whereas "klaat", which is "a shortened form of blood cloth" (Allsopp 2003: 331), is yet another "indecent exclamation of surprise or anger" (Allsopp 2003: 331).

(Johnson 1975: 51), is not only a poetic Black British version of the Jamaican song, a cultural hybrid, but a product of the representative of the confrontational post-Windrush generation that questions the social status quo and locates their own "arena[s] of contestation" (Procter 2003: 75). One of them was deeply entrenched racial profiling, embodied by "the [1964] unofficial slogan [of Conservative MP Peter Griffiths] 'If you want a Nigger for a Neighbour, vote Labour'" (Procter 2003: 25), and vigorously objected to by Johnson in his later poems.

3. The echo in the present

If Johnson's 1974 debut collection is a poetic lesson in Afro-centric historiography and a treatise on the causes of revolutionary turmoil in the ethnically diverse cold war/post-colonial UK, then "One Love", the last section of his 1975 *Dread Beat and Blood*, is an attempt to build an intercultural bridge between the Jamaican-conceived Afrocentric ideology of Rastafari and LKJ's Afro-Britain. With pylons rooted in the depths of the Black Atlantic, it is a bridge markedly made out of bricks and mortar of the African soil. As a fixed link between the Third World and Europe, the construction reverberates with the echo of the colonial past, making it resonant at present.

The final segment of the collection comprises poems such as "Peace an Love", "Wi a Warriyah (For Rasta Love)" and "One Love", all of which are manifestly inspired by Rastafarianism. These texts feature numerous examples of Rasta-specific Biblical stylisation – primarily Old Testament mannerisms, fire and brimstone rhetorics and instances of dread talk. For instance, in "Peace an Love", characterised by archaic conjugation e.g. "bloweth", Johnson employs "the discursive style of Old Testament prophets" (Prahlad 2001: 14). The poem, being a forthright message of "peace an love to all mankine" (Johnson 1975: 65), is an upfront jeremiad which typically inveighs against "de wicked [who] got to bleed" (Johnson 1975: 65) and positions Johnson as the prophet, certain of his knowledge, in full command of his oracle and its separatist dualism between the (man)kind and the wicked; "lightnin shall strike deir chariots of war/in

fire they shall burn to ashes" (Johnson 1975: 65) reads the Rasta augury. Such biblical imagery and related lexis come as no surprise if one takes into consideration the impact of Rastafarian reggae on Johnson and the childhood influence of family socialisation. Reminiscing about growing up in Jamaica, the poet recalls reading to his

> grandmother (who was illiterate) at nights; and she used to love the Psalms, the Proverbs, Songs of Solomon, Ecclesiastes. And I used to love that kind of poetry; and when I began to write I used to write a lot of thou and thy and all this kind of thing – that was my poetic model (Morris 2005: 90).

"Wi a Warriyah (For Rasta Love)", the second poem of the section, is structured on the call and response pattern and re-enacts a dread talk dialogue between a cantor and a chorus, whose interactive chant is a celebration of Rasta values, focussing on Africanness, warriorhood and the invincibility of the righteous:

> CRIER: WI A WARRIYAH
>
> CHORUS: bold an bustin
>
> CRIER: WI A WARRIYAH
>
> CHORUS: blazin red an dread
>
> CRIER: said de gold an de green
>
> CHORUS: lion today!
>
> CRIER: I-yah I-yah I-yah warriyah
>
> CHORUS: SODOM AN GOMARROW! (Johnson 1975: 66).

"Wi a Warriyah (For Rasta Love)", besides being an expression of the poet's mid-1970s concerns, refers to the group Rasta Love, accompanied by which LKJ "used to recite (...) [his] poetry with Rasta drums, bass, funde and repeater" (Morris 2005: 88) from 1973 to 1975. Even then he was reluctant to embrace the teachings of Rastafari and steadfastly remained "the only none Rastafarian" (Futrell 1979: 10) member of the musical ensemble. Deeply as he was

involved with Rasta Love, ultimately, "as an atheist[4]" (Wroe 2008), he was unable to "identify with the Selassie thing" (Morris 2005: 88). Interviewed in 1979, LKJ confessed to "understand[ing] religion from an historical point of view" (Futrell 1979: 10). As such, he diagnosed Rastafarianism as "the most powerful anti-colonial movement to emerge in the West Indies" (Futrell 1979: 10). Consequently, Rasta became a persistent centripetal force in his artistic life:

> In all of my albums, there's also some repeater playing percussion in the background. Rasta is important for me on that level – as a cultural force that broadened our consciousness and opened our consciousness to our African heritage and our African ancestry (Gross 1997).

The motif of communal consciousness-raising – "dis is de HOWA/OF KONSALIDAESHAN" (Johnson 1975: 69) – re-emerges in the conclusive poem of the section[5]. "One Love" starts as a description of the root of the systemic problem – "man an man/each an every one/a suffa pan dis lan/unda de oppression of a common han" (Johnson 1975: 68), and develops from a call for bellicose solidarity in the face of brutality – "babylonian charriots chuckin speed/yu dash whey yu weed" (Johnson 1975: 68), "anadda man stans/and he watches/an you watch too/as babylon boot root kratches/as dem beat a bredda black an blue" (Johnson 1975: 69) – into a pragmatic solution: "but love is just a word;/give it MEANIN/thru HACKSHAN" (Johnson 1975: 69). It is in the insistence on activism that I see the seeds of Johnson's future headway "from Black Power to black working-class" (Wroe 2008) evident in his later collections. LKJ's cultural negotiation of importing Rastafarian imagery and implanting it in his "Brixton Creole" (King 2005: 108) cadences manifested in the "One Love" section would – when confronted with palpable

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4 Ironically, LKJ admits that his "transition from the taken-for-granted God as the creator of the universe to a more agnostic position came through Rastafari" (Taylor 2003: 11).

5 "To Show It So" – the third poem of the section concentrates on plantation past and, in accordance with Afrocentrism, advocates present retribution: "mek it ripe fe de time dat is rite" (Johnson 1975: 67).

institutionalised racism in the UK of the late 1970s and early 1980s – be no longer artistically and philosophically viable.

4. Conclusion

As discussed above, Johnson's early literary output (1970s-1975) is a poetic traverse from Africa to the Caribbean to England. As such, his body of work is the product of a writer weaned on "Third Worldist" (King 2005: 23) and Black Power philosophies who historicises the present-day consequences of the Middle Passage, draws on the Afro-discourse of roots reggae and informedly utilises elements of Rastafarianism. His 1974 play as well as a selection of his 1975 poems are specimens of Johnson's overt endorsement of Afro-Caribbean aesthetics and delineate the first stage of his literary development.

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