

David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution*, London: Pluto Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780745338132 (paper); ISBN: 9780745338149 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786803498 (ebook)

At the end of the first chapter of his fine book on the poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, David Austin contends that an “immanent undercurrent flows through many of his poems as they reveal injustice and archive struggles for social change in times of dread” (p.43).¹ This distillation of Johnson’s poetic and political contribution crystallizes Austin’s approach to the poet’s “uncanny capacity to guide us through dread and destitute time” (p.46). Through doing so *Dread Poetry and Freedom*, the first book length study of Johnson’s work, develops a key set of arguments about the relations between politicised forms of poetry and radical social change and develops a key lens on the way that Johnson’s work generates articulation of transnational relations, solidarities and imaginaries. In this regard the book builds on, and further develops, some of the innovative thinking about transnational circulation of radical political ideas, especially those associated with black radicalism, that were central to its author’s earlier work *Fear of a Black Nation* on the “Congress of Black Writers” held in Montreal in 1968 (see Austin 2013).

Dread Poetry and Freedom first situates Johnson’s routes, including moving from Jamaica to London in the 1960s, and locates his poetry as “part of the cultural and political praxis that Caribbean and Afro diasporic people” (p.21) have engaged with in Britain, referencing the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett’s argument that this process was “colonizin in reverse” (ibid.). Austin also notes how reggae music, African American poetry, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon combined as key influences on Johnson as he emerged as a young poet in

¹ Born in Chapelton, Jamaica, in 1952, Linton Kwesi Johnson is a “dub” poet who is based in England since 1963. Active in organisations such as the Race Today Collective, he has released a number of acclaimed albums with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band, including *Dread Beat an’ Blood*, *Making History* and *Tings an’ Times*. In 2002, his *Selected Poems, Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, were published by Penguin Classics. For more, see <https://lintonkwesijohnson.com/linton-kwesi-johnson/>

the “dread days in London in the 1970s” (p.19). Drawing attention to the importance of Johnson’s involvement with organisations such as the British Black Panther Movement and the Race Today Collective, Austin emphasises how his “poetry has been rooted in his active participation in the very politics that he has given expression to in his writing” (p.19). The book then engages with a number of core thematics that Johnson has engaged with including chapters on dread dialectics and on the importance of Johnson’s engagements with socialism through a detailed discussion of 1991’s collection/album *Tings an’ Times* with its strong sense of the possibilities for a renewed socialist project in the wake of the collapse of totalitarian, “actually existing socialism” in Eastern Europe.

Through doing so Austin challenges the “tendency to limit Johnson’s poetic production to ‘black struggles’, as well as a failure to appreciate the universality and transnationality that is implicit in the particularity of the experiences that he captures in his ‘black poems’” (p.151). A core contribution of *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is to draw out the active ways in which Johnson’s work dialogues with a range of key transnational intellectual figures and movements and political and cultural struggles. In this regard I think Austin’s discussion of the relations between Johnson’s poetry and Frantz Fanon’s work is particularly important. Thus he points to the ways that “Fanon’s poetic-dramatic language left an indelible imprint on Johnson’s early dread poems” (p.88), arguing that in poems like “Dread Beat an’ Blood”, “we witness the echoes of his eloquent description of the colonial condition in Johnson’s depiction of internecine violence in Babylonian Britain” (ibid.).

Austin here not only brings a powerful lens to an engagement with Johnson’s poetry, he also reflects back on Fanon noting how “critics have generally tended to downplay the dramatic tension and poetics in Fanon’s work” (p.85), indicating the generative character of the dialogues developed in *Dread Poetry and Freedom*. By positioning Johnson’s work as part of a dynamic set of transnational political solidarities and connections Austin also signals the force, impact and reach of his work and performances. Drawing on Richard Iton’s incisive arguments about the importance of “the capacity to imagine and operate simultaneously within, against, and outside the nation-state” (Iton 2008: 202, quoted on p.152), Austin

locates Johnson's work as part of strategies for "challenging racialized exclusion and domination from within the nation-state while transcending its boundaries and limitations" (p.152). The positioning of Johnson's work as part of a broader transnational dialogues on questions of resistance and struggle is arguably at its strongest and most textured in his extended discussion of "Reggae fi Radni", Johnson's powerful elegy for the Guyanese intellectual and Black Power activist Walter Rodney.

Austin reads "Reggae fi Radni" as part of a transnational set of elegies on Rodney and locates Johnson's poem in relation to various dialogues about Rodney in the wake of his assassination in 1980 by figures linked to Forbes Burnham's Peoples' National Congress government in Guyana. He argues that central to Johnson's poem is a dialogue with a key statement by Rodney's friend and mentor C.L.R. James. Austin notes that in his speech "Walter Rodney and the Question of Power" made shortly after Rodney's death, James argued that "despite the repression of the PNC government, the climate in Guyana was not ready for an immediate and direct insurrectionary challenge for power" (p.140). By drawing attention to Johnson's engagement with James here, Austin makes it clear that he is not arguing that "that the poem does not reflect the poet's independent assessment of Rodney", but rather is seeking "to highlight the interplay between his poetry, Rodney's politics and James's assessment of Rodney's praxis" (p.118). Austin also emphasises the significance of the closing lines of Johnson's poem which by observing that "the really crucial scene" is "when the people dem come in" make an explicitly Jamesian reflection on the importance of working people's self-activity.

"Reggae fi Radni" also touches on a set of engagements with questions around geopolitics which are discussed here in relation to various poems in insightful ways. I particularly liked the discussion of "Di Eagle an' di Bear" with its discussion of the "indifference that many felt towards the threat of apocalyptic nuclear attack" given that "their lives already constituted a dystopian nightmare" (p.117). As with discussions of poems such as "Mi Revalueshanary Fren" on the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 and their consequences for black liberation, this emphasises Johnson's insightful and critical takes on

geopolitics. While indelibly shaped by Austin's respect and admiration for Johnson, *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is not afraid of probing aspects of his work in critical terms. Thus he compares Johnson's failure to give a focus on gender dynamics a "significant place in his poetry" (p.76) unfavourably to the way such concerns are made central to the work of Jamaican poet Jean Binta Breeze. He also indicates a frustration with Johnson becoming less active politically in his later years and contends that this has had negative implications for his work.

Austin gives strong weight to Johnson's dual role both as a poet and as a popular artist through his work with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band, but it would have been interesting to have had more engagement with the dynamics of Johnson's performance of the poems. Austin does engage strongly with the recordings themselves, but I think it would also have been productive to think more about the style and character of Johnson's live performances of his poems. These have been crucial to the articulation of their political impact and circulation and to their location in the transnational spaces of exchange and dialogue that Austin centres in the book. Further, it is also significant that Johnson's work has been important in performances through directly politicised spaces such as rallies or in demonstrations outside police stations which have been important in shaping their political articulation. In this regard, however, I hope that Austin's book will inspire further engagements with Johnson which pick up on themes like this. This is particularly important given that despite his pivotal role and interventions relatively little has been written on Johnson.

For Austin, Johnson's poetry "exemplifies the role that poetic insight and foresight can play in articulating politics that capture a given historical moment while foreshadowing human possibilities that are largely unapparent" (p.19). Reading Austin's account of Johnson's works emphasises how deeply they resonate and speak in different ways to the pressing issues of the current political conjuncture. Austin's text also powerfully animates a whole set of transnational dialogues on politics and culture in ways which suggest the articulation of struggles for more hopeful futures.

References

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