Critical Myopia and Black British Literature: Reassessing the Literary Contribution of the Post-Windrush Generation(s)

Abstract

In 1995 a new literary prize, the Saga Prize, was established for black authors born in Britain, prompted by its founder Marsha Hunt's belief that 'there is no black British fiction, period'. Hunt's comment, aside from its problematically narrow definition of the already contested term 'black British' as 'blacks born in Britain', reflects a much wider selective amnesia concerning black British literature. That such critical myopia should coexist with increased British media interest in West Indian and black British literature of late, is highly ironic; that it should so narrowly precede the fiftieth anniversary of the 'Windrush generation' points to the cultural and political urgency of re-assessing the contribution of West Indian and black British writers to post-war literature in Britain. Despite the possibility of tracing certain periodizations within this time span and the need to recognize shifts in the way such writers have been categorized, framed or read at different times, it is possible to regard such writing as a community of representations stretching over fifty years, one which has profoundly shaped contemporary British literary praxis but has often been critically neglected.

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Critical Myopia and Black British Literature: Reassessing the Literary Contribution of the Post-Windrush Generation(s)

‘In terms of my own work, I could have benefited from a critical tradition. We didn’t have one at that time and we’re only beginning to scratch at one in this country now.’

Linton Kwesi Johnson, 1996

In 1995 a new literary prize, the Saga Prize, was established for black authors born in Britain, prompted by its founder Marsha Hunt’s belief that ‘there is no black British fiction, period’. Hunt’s comment, aside from its problematically narrow definition of the already contested term ‘black British’ as ‘blacks born in Britain’, reflects a much wider selective amnesia concerning black British literature. That such critical myopia should co-exist with increased British media interest in West Indian and black British literature of late, is highly ironic; that it should so narrowly precede the fiftieth anniversary of the ‘Windrush generation’ points to the cultural and political urgency of re-assessing the contribution of West Indian and black British writers to post-war literature in Britain. Despite the possibility of tracing certain periodizations within this time span and the need to recognize shifts in the way such writers have been categorized, framed or read at different times, it is possible to regard such writing as a community of representations stretching over fifty years, one which has profoundly shaped contemporary British literary praxis but has often been critically neglected. Indeed, the last fifty years in Britain attest not to a ‘void of voices, a long silence’ but to a remarkable diversity of black literary voices which are only beginning to receive the critical attention they deserve. In the first part of this article I consider some of the shifts in the categorization of black writers in Britain as ‘West Indian’ or ‘black British’ and survey the more recent critical neglect of black British writing. In the second part of the piece, I concentrate on the important contribution of Linton Kwesi Johnson to the consolidation of a black artistic community in Britain, and address some neglected aspects of his work.

When, in 1976, James Berry complained that ‘Westindians here are a long way away from the dynamic cultural activities of American blacks or their fellow Westindians at home. They are grossly underexplored,
underexpressed, underproduced and undercontributing' his comments reflected a profound sense of this period as a transitional one in black British culture, caught between the explosion of West Indian writing in Britain of the Windrush generation and the first optimistic movements towards consolidating a black artistic community in Britain in the 1960s and early 1970s, and a climate of disappointment, indirection, even despair, felt by those who sought to encourage black British creativity in the 1970s, a decade marked by continued racism, exclusion and increased hostility towards Britain's black population. However, the 1970s were to be absolutely crucial in bringing to the fore a new generation of voices and laying the foundations for the creation of a new literary aesthetic which could be termed 'black British' rather than Westindian or Westindian-British.

Indeed, the 1980s and 90s in Britain were notable for the publication of a number of new West Indian and black British writers, and for an efflorescence of anthologies, wholly or partly dedicated to West Indian and black British writing. Early black British writing was anthologized in *Black British Writers in Britain: 1760-1890*, edited by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (1991) whilst contemporary black writing in Britain was first anthologized by James Berry in his ground-breaking collection *Bluefoot Traveller*, appearing in two editions in 1976 and 1981. This was followed in 1984 by the influential *News for Babylon – The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry*, edited by Berry (1984) and later in the decade, by *Watchers and Seekers – Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*, edited by Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins (1987) and *Hinterland – Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies & Britain*, edited by E.A. Markham (1989). The work of a number of black British poets was also included in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*, edited by Paula Burnett (1986). Having been excluded from *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (1982), West Indian and black British poets gradually found themselves admitted to the pages of a range of anthologies in the 1980s, from a single poem in *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, edited by Tom Paulin (1986) to the rather more generous selection in *Angels of Fire – An Anthology of Radical Poetry in the ‘80s*, edited by Sylvia Paskin et al. (1986) and the tellingly titled *So Very English*, edited by Marsha Rowe (1991). Most interesting of all was the placing of black British poets in a section of their own, alongside three other sections comprising the much touted but disappointing anthology *the new british poetry*, edited by Gillian Allnutt and Fred D’Aguiar (1988).

Even such a selective bibliography as the above might seem, at first glance, to confirm Hunt’s point about there being ‘no black British fiction period’. However, a range of prose writing continued to be published throughout this period, as Prahbhu Guptara’s *Black British Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1986) and David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe’s *A Reader’s Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature*
make clear. Admittedly, black British poetry was by far the most visible manifestation of this creativity but that did not mean that prose writing was non-existent. There were, in fact, a range of reasons for the relative critical neglect of black British prose fiction, not least the ongoing confusion as to how these writers should be categorised (Caribbean or black British or both?) and the powerful publishing presence of both African-American (especially women’s) writing and the extremely high-profile critical status accorded to a number of Asian-British writers in the wake of the Rushdie affair.6

In the 1990s in Britain an increasing number of new novels were published by black British writers, although they were frequently still co-opted to a Caribbean grouping.7 Black British poets were anthologized in Poetry with an Edge, edited by Neil Astley (1993) and Sixty Women Poets, edited by Linda France (1997) and most recently the same publishing house (Bloodaxe) has signed a number of black British poets including John Agard, James Berry, Fred D’Aguiar, Jean Binta Breeze, and Linton Kwesi Johnson. However, popular awareness of these writers and of their literary antecedents, the West Indian writers of the Windrush generation (such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, all of whom migrated to Britain in the 1950s), remained rare, this body of writing being generally critically neglected in all but the most specialized review journals and academic contexts.8

In 1998 with post-colonial studies apparently in the ascendant in the academy, writers such as Grace Nichols and John Agard appearing as recommended options at primary and secondary levels in the National Curriculum and an astonishing proliferation of theoretical writing on black British identities and black British cultural formations emerging from the likes of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Dick Hebdige, Kobena Mercer and others in the last fifteen or so years, one might be forgiven for assuming that black British literature (and particularly the language of this literature) have been equally well surveyed and equally well served. However, the work of black British writers has been curiously neglected in this respect; where criticism exists it is to be found, with very few exceptions, scattered throughout specialized journals and edited collections rather than in full length studies.

The 1996 publication of Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, edited by Houston Baker et al. one of the most ambitious publications in the field, is a case in point. The essays in Black British Cultural Studies engage in debates surrounding cultural identity, diaspora, race, ethnicity, and the politics of representation in Britain, almost exclusively in relation to visual media; the important contribution of black British writers and writing to these same debates is thus elided; moreover, the text also fails to address black British language and language politics other than in the most fleeting and abstract way.9 At least four readers on Colonial and Post-colonial discourse have been published since 1995. However, there have been few
texts specifically addressing black British literary practice. Similarly, the last fifteen to twenty years has seen the publication of a number of important linguistic studies on black British Language, among them the work of David Sutcliffe and Ansel Wong, Roger Hewitt, Viv Edwards and Mark Sebba. However, very few have been concerned with the interface between language and literature or the literary use of creoles in a British context.

In an early review of one of the novels of emigrant life by West Indian writers of the Windrush Generation (such as Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, all of whom emigrated to Britain in the 1950s), the reviewer commented on the 'strangeness' of the London portrayed in these novels: 'Mr Salkey, concentrating on the impact of London on an educated Jamaican succeeds in making parts of that city as foreign to the English as Babylon or Buenos Aires - but then today they are.' The continuing critical tendency to frame West Indian writers and writing in Britain as exotic, 'other', immature, overly specialist in subject matter and idiomatically problematic - even linguistically alienating - from the perspective of a white, establishment readership, was only one of the ways in which the immigrant population was marginalized, excluded from official 'maps' of literary and cultural production, during the initial contact period.

In the 1950s and 1960s, most of the writers of the Windrush Generation were regarded (and regarded themselves) as West Indian writers rather than British or British-Westindian. Their work was accordingly co-opted to an emergent West Indian canon and/or brought within the hegemonic sway of the category 'Commonwealth Literature'. However, subsequent generations of black writers in Britain, many of them British-born, have been far less willing to accede to this category, preferring to signal dual or exclusively British affiliations and actively choosing a much more politicized positionality as writers. Despite the important linguistic experimentation of writers such as Sam Selvon, many of the 'transplanted voices' of the Windrush generation were writers content to appropriate predominantly European forms, primarily of course, the novel. Arguably, later generations have been much more concerned to forge new cultural and literary forms. Their experiences of Britain and their narratives of 'Britishness' (where they exist) have been determined by very different social, economic and political conditions; their experiences of racism and of a range of exclusions (economic, political, cultural) have been materially altered, not least by eighteen years of conservative government under Thatcher. As Dick Hebdige has recently argued:

for young blacks in Britain in the wake of the riots in Brixton and at Broadwater farm, liable to negative coverage in the press and on TV (where they figure predominantly as victims, culprits, unemployment figures, 'immigration' figures), subject to aggressive and intensive policing, such a blatant assertion of the right to be a black Londoner, to be both black and
British, has political bite – this is an identity traced out along a special jagged kind of ‘British edge’.16

The singular black British voice in this context is that of Linton Kwesi Johnson. Johnson was born in Jamaica four years after the S.S. Windrush sailed and he arrived in Britain some fifteen years after its arrival. By the 1970s, his poetic voice had burst onto a very different London scene to that of Selvon, Salkey and Lamming – politicized by the activities of the Black Panthers in Britain and the growth of black consciousness abroad, influenced by Jamaican reggae and grass-roots cultural activity across the Caribbean. Despite Johnson’s very different passage to, and arrival in, England, his ‘second-generation voice’ has arguably been the most important in this process of radical ‘mapping’ of black presence and black experience in Britain, especially as concerns the subject matter, form and language of black British literature. Almost fifty years on, novelists such as Salkey, Lamming and Selvon are still relatively ‘invisible’, not widely known or read outside specialized circles, although the work of succeeding generations of black writers and artists in Britain is at last receiving wider recognition. This greater visibility has been made possible, in significant part, by Johnson’s pioneering work and his wider role in the consolidation of a black British artistic community in Britain in the 1970s.17 In this article I consider a small selection of Johnson’s poems ranging from the mid-1970s to the present, not in terms of their treatment of key events in recent black Britain but in terms of their language and form, a more critically neglected aspect of Johnson’s poetry.

The poem ‘Reggae Sounds’ first appeared in printed form in Johnson’s second collection, Dread Beat an Blood, (1975) and later in recorded form on the album Bass Culture (1980). It locates itself within a West Indian/black British Sound System culture of reggae Deejaying, toasting, ‘versioning’ and ‘dubbing’ and explores reggae not only as musical form but also as the basis of a wider range of black cultural forms and cultural phenomena within which the interrelation of words and music, and the use of some form of Jamaican creole, is crucial. It was from such roots that dub poetry itself developed, although Johnson has repeatedly insisted on important distinctions between the oral art of the dub poet and that of the reggae deejay.18 Poems such as ‘Reggae Sounds’, ‘Bass Culture’ and ‘Klassical Dub’ all make use of chains of onomatopoeic word-sounds (‘Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing’ and ‘SCATTA-MATTASHATTA-SHACK’19) combined with a high incidence of dynamic verbs or verbs of motion, usually in participle form (‘bouncing’, ‘sounding’) or gerund form (‘searching’, ‘turning’ and ‘burning’). The frequent incidence of deeply symbolic nouns, such as ‘blood’, ‘storm’, ‘flame’, ‘root’ and ‘pain’ in ‘Reggae Sounds’ is reminiscent of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, which Johnson has acknowledged as a key influence on his work.20 They are often combined in alliterative groups, as in ‘bubblin
bass/a bad bad beat/pushin gainst the wall/whey bar black blood’ (from ‘Bass Culture’) and, as such, recognizably correlate to Albert B. Lord’s concept of sound clusters in alliterative or assonaic form and of the use of key words as ‘bridge[s] between idea and sound’ which he observed to be characteristic techniques in oral literature.

More significantly Johnson uses such formulations to capture and recreate the power and kinetic energy which is intrinsic to many black cultural forms – not least music and the creative use of creole in a power-driven, performance context. The language and music of this poem, as in many of Johnson’s poems, is characterized by a particular spiritual restlessness; it reflects an historical experience of violation, pain and yearning, the ‘hurting black story’ to which he makes reference in ‘Reggae Sounds’; significantly (and it is from this factor that Johnson’s best poetry derives its strength), it is a language, ever aware of the violence it can barely contain, the kind of violence – actual or imagined – which could erupt at any moment within the urban context of continued frustrations, injustices and deprivations, in which many of the poems are set. In certain poems from the 1970s and early 1980s such as ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ and the tremendously atmospheric ‘Street 66’, this particular creative use of the inter-relationship of reggae rhythm and urban creole, takes on a further cultural specificity, that of Rastafarianism. The use of lexical items such as the I-prefix is combined with a deliberately created aura of ‘Dreadness’ – a peculiar blend of menace, fascination and/or celebration of Rasta cultural identity which locates struggle in ‘Babylon’ firmly within the 1970s black Britain: the Blues Party, Sound System Culture, urban violence and police brutality.

In ‘Reggae Sounds’ the relationship between music and the word is, as I have suggested, foregrounded as the subject rather than merely the medium of his poem. In this way, it might be argued, Johnson draws attention to the form, and particularly the role of the voice and orality within his work, as being as significant as the more frequently privileged content. This is most clearly evidenced through Johnson’s highly controlled use of intonational patterning throughout the poem. In the recorded version of the poem, for example, he pitches the opening line of the first stanza (or aural unit) relatively high and delivers it with considerable intensity: ‘Shock - black bubble - doun - beat bouncing’; this is immediately contrasted with the drop in pitch, as well as intensity, of the second line: ‘rock-wise tumble-doun sound music’, before the return, in the third line, to the same pitch and intensity as the first. Finding adequate terms to describe this process is problematic because there is ‘no traditional terminology in phonetics for describing the many variations of pitch, loudness and tempo found in speech’. However, such a performance bears some analogy to the terms used to describe classical forms of music: forte/fortissimo (increased levels of loudness), allegro/allegrissimo (increased tempo of music – here of speech), piano/pianissimo
(decreased levels of loudness) and lento/lentissimo (decreased tempo of music, or in this case, of speech). Indeed, the whole rhythmic and tonal structure of the first aural unit can be seen in terms of a musical analogy in which an instrumental opening precedes the breakthrough of the melody; similarly, the last line forms a chorus-like refrain, positioned between the sung and the spoken word in performance and redolent with significance. Johnson also adapts other musical techniques such as syncopation (from jazz) and the 'bubble up' or 'reverb' (from reggae) in this and other poems and this gestures toward the usefulness of a reading of his poetry within such frames.

In 'Street 66' Johnson creates a very different dramatic effect from his use of an adapted creole in conjunction with a reggae rhythm. As I have noted elsewhere, 'Street 66' describes the ganja-induced atmosphere of a blues party and the sudden appearance of the police on a drugs raid. In this poem, the overt violence of poems such as 'Five Nights of Bleeding' has become more subtle and subliminal, adding an undercurrent of threatened or imminent violence which makes the poem powerfully evocative and atmospheric. As with all Johnson's poetry, 'Street 66' is more effective when heard rather than read and rhythmic control and careful pacing are crucial – especially when, as at the end of this poem, dramatic effect is called for.23

The recorded version of the poem on the album Bass Culture, although accompanied by music, testifies to Johnson's skill in using creole to create dramatic and atmospheric effects. For example, he uses gently alliterative lines which exploit the 'open' vowel sounds of creole and make use of internal rhymes ('De room woz dark dusk howling softly six a' clack/charcoal light, the fine sight woz moving black') and lines whose alliterative 'm's' create a mellifluous, hypnotic effect ('the soun woz music mellow steady flow/an man on man just mystic red'), the 'mellow steady flow' of the Blues party atmosphere. Such lines are carefully juxtaposed with lines where the alliterative effect is altogether harsher and more abrasive and which feature a more abrupt rhythm: 'Outta did rock shall come greener riddim/ eben more dread dan what de breeze of glory bred', 'the drought and dry root out'. These lines, with strong biblical cadences, presage the possibility of violence at the poem's end, especially when Western warns: 'any policeman come yah will get some righteous rassclght licks'. This is echoed in his final, disturbingly measured words: 'Yes, dis is street 66/Step right in a tek some licks'.

However, the creole which Johnson adapts as his basic medium, is also particularly suited to lyrical uses, as part of a directly personal and intense style. Unlike 'Standard English' it is an informal, emotive language strongly associated with intimacy and group solidarity rather than distance or divisiveness amongst speakers, able to offer a refreshing directness in place of the abstraction or formality of Standard English. Johnson's 'Reggae fi Dada' is one of the best examples of his lyrical or elegiac use of
creole. It was anthologized in the 1980s in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*, edited by Paula Burnett (1986) and *Hinterland*, edited by E.A. Markham (1989); it also appears in printed form in his selected poems *tings an times* (1991), and in recorded form on the album of the same name (1991). I have argued elsewhere that this poem perhaps constitutes the ‘finest creole elegy to date, combining as it does a deep sense of personal loss in its elegiac address to his father, a lament for the decay of a society and a razor-sharp indictment of the violence, corruption, and economic privations which the poet sees as afflicting contemporary Jamaica’. On returning to Jamaica for his father’s funeral, the poet reflects upon an oppressive society ‘where people fraid fi waak/fraid fi think fraid fi taak’ and where atrocious urban social conditions prevail ‘people livin back-to-back/ mongst cackroach an rat/mongst dirt an dizeez, subjek to terrorist attack/political intrigue/kanstant grief/an noh sign of relief’.

One salient technique in such sections is the use of extended runs of rhyming clauses to ‘drive home’ a point and to create, by their very momentum, a sense of the observer’s impotence and inability to change such a progression of events. This is a technique very similar to that employed by the late Michael Smith in his seminal dub poem ‘Mi Cyaan Believe It’. ‘Reggae fi dada’ is also characterized by ‘striking ... biblical imagery and cadences [as well as] the use of repetition [and] an incrementally shifting refrain’. The discrepancies between the popular image of Jamaica as a ‘sunny isle’ and its actuality are neatly observed by Johnson, the only consistency he can offer is the fact that ‘a deh soh mi bawn’. However, even this repetitive refrain is subject to change, as the poet is forced to chart the progressive news of first the sickness, then the death of his father. Johnson ensures his elegy for both parent and society are united by implicating the latter in the former’s relatively early death. In the haunting passage of incredible tenderness with which the poet bids his father ‘galang’ to final peace, we find Johnson’s handling of creole at its most lyrical, intimate and intense: ‘galang dada/galang gwaan yaw sah/ yu nevah ad noh life fi live/just di wan life fi give/yu did yu time pan ert/yu nevah get yu jus dizert/galang goh smile inna di sun/galang goh satta inna di palace af peace’. It is with the same devastating simplicity that the poem ends: ‘soh we bury yu a Stranger’s Burying Grounlnear to mum an cousin Daris/nat far fram di quarry/douna August Town’.

The more meditative nature and wide-ranging subject matter of many of the new poems in *tings an times* (1991) led many to suppose that the gently self-deprecatory humour of poems such as ‘Lorraine’ and the more sophisticated satire of ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ had been left behind for good. However, included amongst Johnson’s latest poems on *LKJ A Cappella Live* (1996) is a remarkable self-reflexive, counter-discursive poem which re-enters such territory. The poem, ironically entitled ‘If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet’, was written in response to the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth
Century Poetry’s use of a somewhat deprecatory definition of dub poetry as ‘over-compensation for deprivation’. In this poem, released some twenty-one years after Johnson’s first collection, Johnson again draws attention to the form and nature of dub poetry, but in very different ways to those employed in ‘Reggae Sounds’. That such instances of misunderstanding and critical marginalization of black British literature should endure well into the 1990s is depressing, but that black British literature is more firmly rooted than ever, a vital component of the contemporary British literary scene, testifies not only to a tenacious history of black writing in this country but points also to a vigorous and exciting future.

NOTES


2. Increased media interest in black British literature has been signalled not only by the establishment of the Saga prize, but by many other developments. For example, X-Press, an independent black press which launched the tremendously popular, if controversial, Yardie in 1992 has continued to enjoy a high profile. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Abdulrazak Gurnah and other British-based black and Asian writers have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize whilst David Dabydeen, The Counting House (1996) is shortlisted for the Irish Impac Prize. Two black British writers, David Dabydeen and Moniza Alvi, were included in a recent much publicized ‘New Generation Poets’ promotion. Also there have been a number of recent BBC adaptations of black British writing: the serialization for radio of Saga prize-winner, Diran Adebayo’s first novel Some Kind of Black and C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary and for television, Caryl Phillips, The Final Passage. A new black British newspaper, New Nation was launched in 1996 (with Diran Adebayo as one of its key contributors) and there has been increased coverage of black British writing and publishing on magazine programmes such as BBC 2’s Birthrights and Black Britain and on Radio 3, which has recently featured programmes written and/or introduced by writers David Dabydeen, Merle Collins and Grace Nichols. Most recently, John Agard has been appointed as poet in residence at the BBC for the duration of 1998.


4. For example, CAM, the Caribbean Artist’s Movement was established in London in 1966.


6. Rushdie was, of course the main ‘beneficiary’ of this dual-edged publicity but other writers such as Hanif Kureishi also arguably benefited from increased critical attention as a result.

set up the Saga Prize.

8. The most notable exception is, of course, that of V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul has not suffered critical neglect, indeed he is probably the highest profile West Indian writer in Britain. However, Naipaul, like Salman Rushdie is often framed not as a black British writer but, in Timothy Brennan's terms, as a 'Third World cosmopolitan'. Despite having produced work which is clearly located in Britain and relevant to debates on Britishness (e.g. The Enigma of Arrival, 1987) he continued to be categorized as a West Indian writer or as a 'third world cosmopolitan'.


10. The Heart of the Race, ed. by Beverley Bryan et al; Storms of the Heart, ed. by Kwesi Owusu; Talking Black, ed. by Valerie Mason-John; and The Language of the Black Experience, ed. by David Sutcliffe and Ansel Wong are exceptions, but their remit is broader than a purely literary focus. Similarly, Motherlands, ed. by Susheila Nasta and the more recent, Other Britain, Other British: Essays in Contemporary Multi-Cultural Fiction, ed. by A. Robert Lee contain valuable essays but the former is not exclusively black British in focus and attends only to women writers, whilst the latter's collected essay format only permits a selective rather than comprehensive coverage of the literature.


14. Some commentators such as Winston James have suggested that 'Unlike their parents, who have less attachment to Britain, the second generation of "Caribbeans" are black Britons - whether they chose to be or not' and points to language differences between this group and their Jamaican counterparts in the Caribbean as evidence of this cultural shift. Winston James, 'Migration, Racism and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain', in Inside Babylon, ed. by Winston James and Clive Harris (London: Verso, 1993), p. 252.

15. See, for example, the second part of David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today' in Tibisiri, ed. by Maggie Butter (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 121-135; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, Racialized Boundaries (London: Routledge, 1992); and most recently Avtar Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora (London: Routledge, 1996); as well as Linton Kwesi Johnson’s radical mapping of these years from a black British perspective in poems such as ‘Inglan Is a Bitch’, ‘It Dread Inna Inglan’, ‘Sonny’s Lettah (anti-Sus Poem)’, ‘Mekkin ’ histri’, and especially, ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’ which charts the Brixton riots of 1981 and begins with the historical pronouncement: ‘it woz in april nineteen-eighty-one/doun inna gheto of Brixtan’, all in Tings an Times - Selected Poems (Newcastle:

17. For example his activist stance, public performance style, links with popular culture (reggae music, youth culture), contribution to radio and journalism and involvement in the Race Today Collective.


24. ibid, p. 367.

25. ibid, p. 367.