



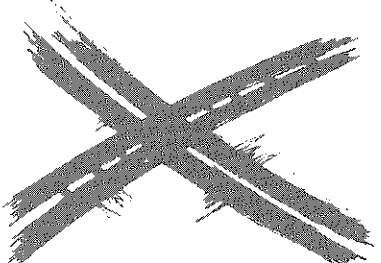
Within this cultural history, Linton Kwesi Johnson's position is unique. He expands and continues the aural/oral traditions of a national culture. Johnson's poems arise out of a political sensibility and commitment; they are at once critical and popular. Throughout his material, independence of action and autonomy are stressed, whether for blacks in Britain or for liberation struggles in the Third World. His difference within a pop field, even within reggae itself, is an expression of his own independence as an artist, poet, and political activist.

I'm just writing poetry in my language, Jamaican poetry, about things I feel are important, trying to convey the experience of what blacks and Asians are in Britain. I'm doing so in the reggae tradition . . . Nothing has changed (since the riots of 1980). Only that some of the houses we burnt down should of been demolished years ago and now they're building some new ones. But Brixton isn't black Britain. Black Britain is London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bradford, Leeds, the inner cities. We're stronger now than we've ever been and we have a greater sense of what we can do in extreme situations. From that point of view there's been a transformation in people's consciousness, people are much more aware of what they can do now than before.

Johnson is a member of the *Race Today* collective and the liner notes on *Making History* (his latest LP) give a comprehensive outline of their activities in such groups as the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement and of Johnson's relationship as an artist to these. Unlike many performing artists and entertainers Johnson is not immersed in music to the exclusion of a political practice. It is this which defines Linton Johnson's strengths and consistency as an artist and what surfaces in his poetry, his recordings and through his presence on a club stage.

We've been able to win some new audiences because I'm sure some of the people coming to see me have never heard of me before . . . that's why I always take the trouble to introduce each number so people can be clear what I'm going on about. I believe in beginning with the particular and coming to the general. It's in our particular focuses that we tend to make general statements of universal relevance. You don't suddenly from somewhere out of the blue grasp the universal.

Denis Corcoran



DISCOGRAPHY

- 'Dread Beat An' Blood'—Poet and The Roots; Virgin, 1978
- 'Forces of Victory'—Linton Kwesi Johnson; Mango, 1979
- 'Bass Culture'—Linton Kwesi Johnson; Mango, 1980
- 'Making History'—Linton Kwesi Johnson; Mango, 1984

The Bun, the Beef

There were somewhat fewer than 45 billion papers served at the 1984 convention of The Popular Culture Association and The American Culture Association. Given the claim by the associations that there were 1,400 participants, my guess is that about 1,100 papers were given. How are we to read this figure? Does it simply assert that volume is a virtue in and of itself? Or is it a subtle warning that given the number of papers some may leave the audience asking, "Where's the beef?" For me, the number of titles in the program simply represented an overwhelming array of sessions. In the end those I chose to attend, were for the most part, focused on literary texts. While a few of the papers I heard might be described as intellectual white buns, devoid even of sesame seeds (and a couple could be described as stale), by far the majority were intellectually meaty. Speakers chose to discuss a wide range of texts: Alcott, Emerson, Canadian women poets, the novels of Engel, of Hammett and of Hansen, to name a few. But for me, attending the conference as both a participant and member of the audience, the important issue became the assumed relation of the literary critic to the study of popular culture.

Of course, the sophomoric analogy to be read in my title was intended to make an obvious point: while the subject of the conference was popular culture it was also its determinant. None of us is immune to the effects of popular culture. It determines our consciousness. Yet, the posture the literary critic so assuredly adopts is that of the outsider who critiques popular culture from this position of privilege. Thus, there is a failure to acknowledge that culture reads the critic even as the critic reads culture; no position of critical privilege exists.

Let me recount two incidents which precipitated my formulation of the question. The first was an exchange in one of the few non-literary sessions I attended. After an uncritical, and therefore politically problematic, presentation of ethnic jokes, the speaker was asked, "What is popular culture?" She had no answer. Her inability even to begin to address the term "popular culture" was not, I suspect, exceptional. While it might be expected that all of the speakers would question, to some degree, the notion of popular culture, this was not the case. Not only did the speakers fail to interrogate the terms of their criticism but the audience never called for them to do so. This suppressed interrogation of the notion of popular culture

in all of the papers I heard (and I include my own) is curious. I now ask: what is the implication of this suppression? What is this silence?

If we allow that commodification constructs mass culture, which in the industrialized world is an aspect of popular culture, the silence is a refusal to articulate critical praxis within relations of commodification. This was illustrated by the session called "Cultural Metamorphosis in Margaret Atwood's Work." After the four papers had been read an agent from a university press in Texas announced that a collection of essays in honour of Atwood's visit to the campus will be published. Submissions were invited. Then there was another announcement made by someone else to the assembled: The Margaret Atwood Society, to be affiliated with The Modern Language Association, is being founded. Atwood's cultural metamorphosis would seem not to be simply restricted to her literary work. She is a commodity. Canadian publishers have long recognized that Atwood's picture on the jacket of a book or the cover of a magazine will generate sales. Atwood, the commodity, now has been franchised to academics. Atwood scholarship is an industry of feminist and Canadian studies. What could be more symptomatic of Atwood's cultural metamorphosis into a commodity than my grammatical transposition of her name into an adjective?

While I am not prepared to assert that economics is the primary determination of human activity it is one of them. The silence inscribed by the literary critic's refusal to acknowledge this determination allows the construction of critical privilege. The importance of the critic is validated by his role as the de-coder of textual mysteries. The critic, however, does not stand outside of the network of textual relations. The critic reads from within a praxis which is socially constructed. Thus, a complex inter-reading between society and critic is established by every reading. It is neither to be condemned nor celebrated because there is neither an inside nor an outside where critical praxis is located. Literary criticism must recognize its project is located within social and historical determinants. The refusal to make such a recognition is tantamount to an affirmation of existing social relations. Thus, the silence pre-empts the possibility of a radical literary praxis. Critics must articulate the complex of relations so that they may speak of popular culture. Regrettably this did not happen at the literary sessions.

Ann Wilson

