

# WRITING ON PUBLIC THEMES LINTON KWESI JOHNSON



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**Carl Tighe**

What moves you in the contemporary political and social world? Is there some issue that makes you angry, upsets you, drives you to protest or speak out? How could you write about it? Literature is a public statement. Writing takes a private thought and puts it in the public domain. Some writers are driven to write about urgent social and political issues. This can take the form of satire or of polemic; but in its form the comment can be almost anything - an essay, a novel, short story, poem, a film, a Banksy artwork on a public wall.



Dub-poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (born Jamaica, 1952) came to Britain in 1963. He lived in Brixton and joined the radical Black Panther movement, organising poetry readings and drumming work with his group, Rasta Love. He went on to study for a degree in sociology at Goldsmiths College and graduated in 1973. His literary honours include: C. Day-Lewis Fellowship, 1977; Associate Fellow of Warwick University, 1985; Honorary Fellow of Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1987; an award at the XIII Premio Internazionale Ultimo Novecento from the city of Pisa for his contribution to poetry and popular music, 1990; the Premio Piero Ciampi Citta di Livorno Concorso Musicale Nazionale in Italy in 1998; an honorary fellowship from Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2003; Honorary Visiting Professor of Middlesex University, 2004; a silver Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica for distinguished eminence in the field of poetry, 2005; and the Golden PEN Award from English PEN for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature, 2012.

His poetry blends cultures, attitudes and political awareness. Much of his work was written during the government of Margaret Thatcher. He wrote his poem 'Sonny's Lettah (Anti-sus Poem)', to protest at injustice, race-hate and police brutality. He is famous for saying: 'Writing is a political act and poetry is a cultural weapon...' and his poem 'Di Great Insohreckshan' commemorates the Brixton riots of 1981. Along with much of his work, this poem is often performed to music provided by his band. Here he uses the form of a verse letter to make his point.

The much hated 'Sus' law was introduced to the UK in the 1960s. Based on Sections 4 and 6 of the Vagrancy Act (1824) this law made it 'illegal for a suspected person or

reputed thief to frequent or loiter in a public place with intent to commit an arrestable offence'. This effectively permitted the police to stop and search anyone they chose, purely on the basis of suspicion that they might be about to commit a criminal offence.

Police misuse of these powers in harassing young black men was a major factor in sparking the Brixton Riots of 1981. These riots and abuse of 'Sus' by the Metropolitan Police led to the abolition of the law. However, the police were reluctant to give up this power and found other areas of the law that allowed them to stop and search people on suspicion. When the Stephen Lawrence inquiry reported in 1999, young black men were still five times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than their white counterparts. By 2005, even though the law had been amended, this disproportion had increased dramatically - young black men were eight times more likely than young white men to be stopped and searched. It is not much different now, and again this year the police have been accused of stopping and searching a disproportionate number of young black men.



This poem clearly meshes the semi-literate oral culture of recent immigrant street language with the established letter-form to create an effective hybrid of powerful protest. The revival in the UK of oral culture and storytelling - reviving an alternative identity - shading into hip-hop and pop culture – asserting immigrant identity - are part of an amalgam of the many different cultures that now make up multi-ethnic Britain, part of the emerging blend of British cultural identities. But here the protest is at the 'institutional racism' the Metropolitan Police are so often accused of, and that is also part of a 'local' reaction against 'globalization', a reaction to the dominant commercial techno-culture and, more ambiguously, a protest at the class power vested in literacy, education, the power of the state and the status quo.

On the surface the poem looks like the simple plea of a semi-literate immigrant, but on closer examination this is an artful and complex construction and there is much more going on it than first meets the eye. In fact it is a highly articulate blend of poetry politics and protest. But that is not all: this is also a performance piece...

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## Sonny's Lettah (Anti-sus Poem)<sup>1</sup>

Jeb Avenue  
London, South West 2  
Inglan  
Dear Ma Maa,

Good Day  
I hope that when these few lines reach you  
they may find you in the best of health

Ma Maa I really don' know how to tell yu dis  
'cause , I did meck a solemn promise  
to teck care a likkle Jim and try  
mi best fi look out fi 'im

Ma Maa a really did try mi best  
but none de less  
mi sorry fi tell yu sey  
poor likkle Jim get aress'  
it was de middle a de rush 'our  
when everybody jus' a hustle an a bustle  
fi go 'ome fi dem evenin' shower

Me and Jim stand up waiting pon a bus  
not causing no fuss  
when all on a sudden a police van  
pull up  
out jump 3 police man  
De 'ole a dem carrying baton

Dem walk up to me and Jim  
one a dem 'ole on to Jim  
sey 'im teckin 'im in  
Jim tell him fi leggo a 'im  
fa 'im no do nuttin  
an 'im naw tief, not even a button

Jim start to riggle  
De police start to giggle

Ma Maa, meck a tell yu weh dem do to Jim  
Ma Maa , meck a tell yu we dem do to him

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<sup>1</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Forces of Victory* (CCD 9566, Island Records, 1979).

Dem tump 'im in 'im belly  
an' it turn to jelly  
Dem lick 'im pon 'im back  
an 'im rib get pop  
Dem lick 'im pon 'im head  
but it tuff like lead  
Dem kick 'im in 'im seed  
an it started to bleed

Ma Maa I just couldn't just stan' up  
deh a no do nutten

So mi juck one ina 'im eye  
an 'im started to cry  
Mi tump one in 'im mout  
an 'im started to shout  
Mi kick one pon 'im shin  
an 'im started to spin  
Mi tump 'im pon 'im chin  
an 'im drop pon a bin  
an crash an dead

Ma Maa more police man come down  
an beat me to de ground

Dem charge Jim fi sus  
Dem charge mi fi murder  
Ma Ma! Don't fret  
don't get depress an down 'earted  
be of good courage

Till I hear from yu  
I remain your son

Sonny

### **FOLLOW-UP WORK**

If possible, listen to a recording of Johnson performing this poem.

- In what ways do you think this is part of an oral tradition?
- In what ways does the 'orality' of 'Sonny's Lettah' contribute to its effect?
- What elements of the written tradition does the poet make use of?
- In what ways does the poet achieve oral effects in writing?
- In what ways might it be said that the poet is subverting the 'dominant culture'?
- In what ways might it be said that the poet is also offering a mildly satirical comment on the language and style of the 'sub-culture'?