Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Linton Kwesi Johnson

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 20th, 2018

We ate corn porridge that morning, sipping tea watching the clubbers stumble into the street. It was milky sweet, the sugar gathered like caramel in the bottom of the cup, the grains smooth like molten glass. One could be forgiven for forgetting how it came to be there, cut by wage slaves in the plantations half a world away, shipped on vessels run on petrol, only to be packaged into teaspoon sized satchels for our first world pleasure. We could glimpse this sweetness and power as the dawn dancehall thumped next door. In our cups of tea, we could catch the rhythms of the islands where the cane was grown only to be 'refined' and 'value added' by industry owned somewhere else, somewhere close to here, down the road in this London town.

The night before, a literary critic friend and I had gone to hear Linton Kwesi Johnson. That smooth lub-dub of his voice was welcoming and resonant, articulating what it was to be black British, representing. Now, as I hold his Penguin Edition collected poems in my hand, I think to ask: is Johnson a world historical poet? How should I think of him next to Louise Bennet or Mervyn Morris? What do I make of 'the Caribbean' from my island continent?

The Caribbean is nowhere to be seen in Australian literary conversations, notwithstanding the superficial feting of Marlon James that ignores creolisation, polyphony and queerness into simply prize winning 'good narrative' or the conservative embrace of VS Naipaul in a repressed, anachronistic way. But 'Australians' can learn from 'the Caribbean' about how to speak back to empire and begin to understand diversity, archipelagos, and the post-national local. It is striking then, when Paul Kane says:

> That is, while British, European, American and even Asian models continue to be crucial to Australian poets, the younger generations are more likely to look to earlier Australian poets for inspiration or instruction than was ever the case before. What that means is that Australian poetry has attained a degree of historical and aesthetic depth and breadth such that it suffices as the basis for itself. In the terms of my book, the absence of romanticism no longer functions as a generative presence in contemporary Australian poetry. The poetry has achieved a sort of homeostasis that allows for an independent systematic development.

The archive, even here, is infinite and an Australian basis might have hitherto been inflected by the globe. But, what of an ‘Australian’ poet who does not wish to work in, for, of Australia? That is to say, what is the tradition of a world historical poet who happens to take their central location as somewhere on the continent but not of it? To which, we must make sense of the Caribbean as a collective consciousness and not simply turn to an ahistorical, Kantian genius, not that these two discourses are separate, even heuristically so in discourses of our own making.

The Caribbean is not, of course, only a colonial construct, but speaking from ‘Australia’ we might see ourselves as joined in the British Commonwealth, fighting for our own independence together, not only playing backyard cricket as siblings do. As Frantz Fanon wrote:

> That imperialism which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits.

That decay is there in crests and anthems, there in members clubs and parliaments. It stops a true liberation that allows us to come into life itself. The decolonisation of the individual, which is to say my liberation, must necessarily happen in the world, which is to say, my bodily presence manifests as a response to the overwhelming impossibility of existence. The Caribbean, like India and South Africa, is peopled like Australia also. In contrast to Fanon, the imperialism of today does not decay – there are no ‘tinctures’ but half-lives radiating in Fukushima and Chernobyl, there are heavy metals in rivers next to mines that won’t go away, there is a trash vortex in the Pacific that one sees on every beach from Saint Lucia to Byron Bay. There is the ceaseless demand by the powerful for things that cannot decompose and so the re-writing and re-wiring of imperialism finds as its greatest weapon the ability to dispose of the very planet itself.

To speak back to this empire now, we might plant breadfruit and mill our own corn. We might use agave and drink mate. In doing so, in extending our corporeal selves to the earthworm, we might also find that, as Fanon says:

In decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation. If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well known words: “The last shall be first and the first last.” Decolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence.

If we are to decolonise ourselves, which is not to say unsettle, but to critique our colonial situation in such a way that we can be free as a type of rooted connectivity, we must know what the question is for our situation. And that depends on the language games we find ourselves in, which is to say, the places we get lost in. The last to decolonise might indeed be the empirical white man, the Queen who rules across her whole dominion, or the President at the apex of his power. This is because he feels as though he is already free given his false consciousness that makes him see the relative liberty of his chains, thinking that this is privilege. The ending of a raced Australia, which is to say the dismantling of the white citizen, would then find solidarity with a Caribbean subject who recognises himself through and after Negritude. It would be a type of existential solidarity that is nevertheless made material through the participation of creative collaboration that is well

critiqued. It is not only that we share being under the master's heel, but that we can become more specific in our poetries in such a way that our locating parochialisms can rail against hegemony no matter what is the dominant paradigm that is rootless and well made. As Aime Cesaire says:

> *At the end of daybreak, the extreme, deceptive desolate eschar*
>
> *on the wound of the waters; the martyrs who do not bear witness;*
>
> *the flowers of blood that fade and scatter in the empty wind*
>
> *like the screeches of babbling parrots; an aged life mendaciously smiling, its lips opened by vacated agonies; an aged poverty*
>
> *rotting under the sun, silently; an aged silence bursting with*
>
> *tepid pustules,*
>
> *the awful futility of our raison d'être.*

That awful futility might be made less awful and less futile by finding in our island homes what it is to be unalone, connected by seas that still can buoy us when all the world seems cancerous and suffocating and we are lost in a cup of tea in the groundhog mornings that come for us no matter where we are found or what we are witness to.

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