Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry

and the Political Aesthetics of Carnival in Britain

British dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ) moved to Britain from Jamaica on the cusp of adolescence in 1963. He arrived in the metropolis during a time of tremendous social and cultural ferment. Living in Brixton, South London, LKJ was quickly immersed in the radical currents that circulated throughout the Black and Asian diasporic world at the time. The Black Panthers, whose youth wing he joined while still attending secondary school, exposed LKJ to the fertile blend of socialist political-economic analysis and Black consciousness that characterizes the internationalist strands of the Black radical tradition.[1] In addition, as a young member of the Caribbean Arts Movement (CAM) in London during the early 1970s, LKJ participated in the ground-breaking debates that took place within that organization concerning the appropriate forms and themes of artistic production among members of the Caribbean exile community in Britain.[2] Popular culture acquired increasing significance as these artists struggled, under the weight of the increasingly incendiary political events of the period, to forge a role for themselves as artists and popular leaders.

Following the lead of figures like Edward Kamau Brathwaite, LKJ sought to craft his own poetic language in order to overcome the traditions of linguistic and mental colonization imposed by the educational apparatus in the British colonies of the Caribbean. He found a model for his own work in what he called the dub lyricist: Jamaican and Black British deejays who would 'toast' or invent improvised rhymes over the heavy rhythm tracks of reggae dub records. As he explains in an essay published in

Race and Class in 1974, LKJ turned to the dub poetry movement that was made into a potent cultural force in Jamaica by Rastafarians such as the poet Bongo Jerry as a way of developing a vernacular aesthetic. Such an aesthetic, he believed, offered a vital connection to the lives of black diaspora youths and responded to the political and aesthetic desires that emerged as West Indians settled in Britain.[3] Although LKJ wrote of the "dub-lyricist" as making "a vital contribution to the oral documentation of the history of Jamaica and to the Jamaican oral tradition," he himself was actively adapting this West Indian tradition to circumstances confronted by Black communities in Britain.[4]

LKJ's lyrics reflect, in other words, the shift from a predominantly exilic focus on the Caribbean evident among older members of CAM to one grounded far more closely in the issues critical to young Black people born and raised in Britain. His work nevertheless remained responsive to trans-Atlantic cultural currents. In 1979, LKJ released his second full-length album, *Forces of Victory*. The songs featured on this album were published the following year in the collection *Inglan is a Bitch*. Unlike his previous LP, *Dread Beat and Blood* (1978), *Forces of Victory* successfully integrated spoken word and musical accompaniment, leading to a compositional style far more heavily influenced by the dictates of lyrical performance than is evident in previous compositions.[5] In addition, *Forces of Victory* and the collection of verse that followed after consistently deployed what is now seen as LKJ's characteristic Black British vernacular for the first time. The album is therefore of particular significance, announcing the arrival of LKJ's mature style as well as offering important accounts of Black British experience during the late 1970s.

The LP *Forces of Victory* took its title from the theme developed by the Race Today collective, of which LKJ was a prominent member, for the Caribbean carnival held in London's Notting Hill neighborhood in 1978. According to an editorial statement in the *Race Today* collective's journal, carnival was "central to the developing cultural movement within the West Indian community in the United Kingdom."[6] In fact, *Race Today* had been deeply involved with the festival since 1976, when running battles broke out between Black youths and the London metropolitan police force, presaging the massive riots that convulsed Britain's cities during the next decade. As its title suggests, LKJ's album brings the potent popular tradition of dub poetry to bear in order to memorialize the endangered carnival and to ensure its continuance. LKJ's celebration of carnival raises a number of broad questions concerning diasporic cultural practices in the metropolis. Was the victory celebrated during the carnival not an ephemeral triumph, one with the durability of papier-mâché in a hard London rain? How was it possible for a recreational event like the carnival to take on such a pivotal symbolic place in representations of identity and community in Britain? What enduring conflicts within the national body politic did carnival crystallize and what fresh debates did it catalyze? How, finally, does LKJ's performance poetry intervene in the complex social circumstances that surround carnival?

The Historical Roots of Carnival

The word "carnival" derives from the Latin *carnem levare*, "to put away meat." Carnival, in terms of the traditional Catholic calendar, is an occasion to celebrate the life of the senses one last time before the penance and purgation of Lent. This ecclesiastical

context has fueled readings of carnival as a temporary inversion of the dominant order, a brief bacchanalia that engages and canalizes energies that might otherwise have been used to orchestrate a more durable rupture in the status quo.[7] Yet carnival is also one of the central rituals of geographically distant but culturally related African and South Asian diasporic populations, from Port of Spain to Rio, New York, Toronto, and London. The historical origins of the Trinidad carnival and the frequent conflicts that attended its annual celebration suggest that, at least in the context of the African and South Asian diaspora, it plays more than the role of a fleeting catharsis.[8] A Bakhtinian reading of carnival as a kind of cultural safety valve elides the festival's role as an enduring site of social negotiation and conflict in the Caribbean. Indeed, behind the breathtakingly beautiful costumes and floats evident during carnival time in locations throughout the Americas and in Britain, behind the relatively evanescent public manifestation of the masquerade that makes carnival so galvanizing for critics and tourists alike, lies an unfolding history of community formation and transformation. The spectacular street festival and its temporary inversion of the political status quo are only the most visible elements of a more elaborate and enduring process of social mobilization.[9]

Carnival's role in Britain during the 1970s in igniting conflict between the Black community and the state was not a new one.[10] Originally a French Creole affair in colonial Trinidad, the predominantly religious celebration quickly changed its racial and class complexion after the emancipation of the slaves in 1838. The freed slaves turned carnival into a celebration and commemoration of their liberation. Having taken Trinidad from the French in 1797, British colonial authorities on the island began seeking to suppress the alarmingly seditious annual festivities. As commentators such as Cecil

Gutzmore have noted, in doing so they were merely extending the tactics of state

repression that they had brought to bear on popular cultural activities in early industrial

Britain.[11] Like such activities, carnival expressed an unruly spirit that challenged the

forms of discipline necessary to the rhythms of industrial labor and production. In

addition, of course, the Trinidad carnival conjured up the specter of the slave rebellions

of the past. For instance, one of the central rituals of Trinidad's carnival during the post-

emancipation period, "canboulay" [*cannes brulées* or burnt cane] reenacts the burning of

sugar cane fields by rebellious slaves.[12] In addition, carnival traditions helped foster

polycultural connections between the creole culture of the island's Blacks and the

indentured laborers brought by the British to Trinidad from South Asia following the end

of slavery.[13] Aside from the elements of class and race satire and subterfuge that surfaced

in carnival costumes and performances, the Caribbean carnival thus also contains a

sedimented history of directly confrontational cultural traditions. Attempts by colonial

authorities to suppress such traditions led to repeated instances of extremely violent

rioting in Trinidad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[14]

True to this Caribbean tradition, carnival in Britain has been a crucial vehicle of

what Kobena Mercer calls the vernacular cosmopolitanism of Britain's diaspora

populations.[15] Indeed, the particularly synthetic quality of the carnival, which involves

virtually every possible medium of creative expression, marks it as a central site for the

creation of such a composite aesthetic. One source of the tensions surrounding carnival

was the failure, during the 1970s, of the British establishment to accept the validity of

carnival as an art form. During the year-long period when the diverse carnival themes

were being developed, costumes created, funds raised, and preliminary celebrations

attended, a repertoire of popular cultural identities was elaborated within Black communities in Britain, as elsewhere in the diaspora. These identities were grounded in a spatial and cultural geography that interwove the local and the global. Moving from the mas' [masquerade] camp to the calypso tent to the streets of Notting Hill, participants in the carnival celebration carved out sites that helped cement the bonds of social cohesion uniting local communities of Caribbean origin in Britain.[16] Mas' themes were carefully debated and researched during the year before the parade, creating an important participatory educational forum for participants that translated into a blend of didacticism and spontaneous pleasure for parade spectators.[17] Indeed, the carnival played a central role in establishing the meaning of Black community and identity in Britain. It offered a defiantly public site for Caribbean immigrants and their children and grandchildren to affirm both their diasporic affiliations and local connections. Today, the Notting Hill carnival is the largest street festival in Europe, attracting approximately two million revelers to a largely peaceful celebration. During the 1970s, however, the agents of the state perceived carnival as an incendiary disruption of public order.

As an event that took place in the streets of the capital city, the Notting Hill carnival was a particularly intense flash point in struggles over spatially embedded definitions of British national identity during the mid- to late-1970s. In his seminal work on the character of nationalism, Tom Nairn characterizes the nation-state as *Janus-faced*.[18] Nairn uses this reference to the Roman god of the threshold to describe the temporal double consciousness of nationalist projects. In order to legitimate the disruptive work of modernization implicit in nation building, nationalist leaders characteristically turn to images – ironically often of quite recent vintage - that signify the

archaic, organic identity of the people.[19] Yet, as Ernst Renan observed, there is another side to nationalist projects. In addition to the construction of collective memories, nationalist projects also engage in acts of strategic forgetting. In the case of Britain, nationalists must forget the remarkably mongrel character of national identity as well as the imperial history that is responsible for post-colonial migration to Britain.

Post-1945 British public life has been characterized by a superabundance of nostalgic images of national identity, many of which are primarily geographical in character.[20] Place became central to national identity. Britishness was represented more than ever as a homogenous affair, the pure product of a proudly autochthonous island race. The racial implications of such insular rhetoric were immediately apparent, and had dramatic impact, as the racially motivated changes in Britain's citizenship laws during the period make clear. In 1971, the right of domicile within Britain that had been extended to colonial subjects by the Nationality Act of 1948 was definitively rescinded. Notting Hill's Caribbean carnival, which began to attract large crowds of revelers in precisely this period, was an inflammatory reminder of the contradictions inherent in the exclusionary definitions of national identity that had gained a legislative seal of approval by the 1970s. The carnival offered dramatically visible evidence of the trans-national, post-colonial connections of a significant number of British subjects. In 1976, more than 1,500 members of the London police force tried to shut down the carnival after attempts to move the festival to a sports stadium or to split it into a number of smaller events failed. The police met with fierce resistance from Black youths. This event and the carnivals that followed it in 1977 and '78 are generally regarded as the coming-of-age ceremonies of the second generation of Black Britons.

The Notting Hill carnival also has specific historical links to the Black community's resistance to neo-fascist racism in Britain. The carnival celebration began as a response to one of the first significant post-war public expressions of racist hostility towards the presence of Britain's non-white citizens. In the summer of 1958, white working class youths whom the press labeled Teddy Boys because of their eccentric attire descended on the dilapidated precincts of London's Notting Hill.[21] Organized by Oswald Mosley's Union Movement (a revival of Mosley's pre-war organization, the British Union of Fascists), crowds of up to four thousand white youths roamed the city streets for four days, assaulting any West Indians they could lay their hands on.[22] The police did nothing to impede their hooliganism until members of the Black community began to organize themselves to counter these attacks. Shortly after such coordinated resistance to racial attacks was organized, the police force moved to reestablished public order. While these events could hardly be said to constitute the origin of a Black public sphere in Britain, they did establish the confidence of Britain's Black community in its ability to turn back racial terror. To help heal the many wounds caused by these experiences, Claudia Jones, a Trinidadian radical active in the Communist Party and anti-colonial circles, organized the first Caribbean carnival in Britain.[23] Bringing together musicians from Trinidad such as the calypso singer Lord Kitchener with activists such as Amy Garvey, former wife of Marcus Garvey, Jones articulated a cultural politics predicated on the political significance of diasporic cultural institutions such as the carnival. Indeed, Jones wrote in the introduction to the 1959 Carnival souvenir brochure: "If then, our Caribbean Carnival has evoked the wholehearted response from the peoples from the Islands of the Caribbean in the new West Indies Federation, this is itself testament to the

role of the arts in bringing people together for common aims, and to its fusing of the cultural, spiritual, as well as political and economic interests of West Indians in the UK and at home."[24] As envisaged by Jones, carnival in Britain was to unify the heretofore-isolated immigrants from diverse islands such as Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad, creating a popular cultural front through which to resist the rise of fascism in the "motherland."

Following Jones's death in the early sixties, the Caribbean carnival went into a decade-long period of hibernation. By the early 1970s, however, a second generation of Black Britons began resuscitating the festival. Following a study trip to Trinidad by carnival organizer Leslie Palmer in 1973, a Caribbean-style carnival was revived in Britain.[25] There was a surge in the popularity of steel pan bands, which provided the rhythmic back beat that allowed revelers to 'jump up' during the carnival procession. By the mid-1970s, steel band music had become a massive popular movement in Britain, with as many as 100 bands organized in the London metropolitan area and formal instruction becoming a regular part of the curriculum in city schools.[26] Mas' camps, where the thematic focus of particular mas' bands or groups in the parade are planned, coordinated, and eventually constructed, also began to proliferate. Since these 'mas camps' are practically a year round affair, they play a significant role in consolidating neighborhood Caribbean communities around the metropolis. In addition to these competing mas' camps, a group of indigenous British calypso singers began to add their topical ballads to fare imported from Trinidad. The carnival was becoming less the ritual of an exiled Caribbean community and more a celebration of the hybrid cultural forms created by Black Britons.

Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black Autonomy

By the mid-1970s, the neo-fascist National Front (NF) was once again a significant force at the polls and on the streets. Racial harassment escalated and increasingly homicidal attacks on Black and Asian people became a regular aspect of life in Britain's decaying inner cities. The NF often tried to polarize communities by organizing marches through poor neighborhoods with a high percentage of non-white residents. NF goons were protected during these marches by a police cordon.[27] Anti-racist groups that sought to repulse such neo-fascist incursions were often arrested or attacked by the police, offering a graphic example of the state's fundamental racial bias to anyone in doubt. As a result of the police failure to challenge the National Front's inflammatory tactics, black communities revived the independent self-defense organizations that had sprung up during the 1958 white riots. The defiant assertion of autonomy found throughout LKJ's *Inglan is a Bitch*, the book where lyrics from his previous two albums were collected in 1980, is a product of this conjuncture during the 1970s. Violence by neo-fascist groups at the time produced a militant practice of counter-violence within the Black community recorded by LKJ in his poem "Fite Dem Back:"

> we gonna smash their brains in
>
> cause they ain't go nofink in 'em
>
> we gonna smash their brains in
>
> cause they ain't got nofink in 'em…
>
>
> some a dem say dem a niggah haytah

an' some a dem say dem a black beatah

some a dem say dem a black stabah

an' some a dem say dem a paki bashah

fashist an di attack

noh baddah worry 'bout dat

fashist an di attack

wi wi' fite dem back

fashist an di attack

den wi countah-attack

fashist an di attack

den wi drive dem back (20)

LKJ's poem begins with a stanza delivered in the exaggerated cockney accent that

characterized the white lumpen youths the National Front was enrolling in its ranks

during the mid-1970s. In the recorded version of the poem, LKJ's voice is subdued

during this first stanza, which is sung in a menacing singsong rhythm that emphasizes the

cockney accent of the fascist speakers. The fascist persona articulates a stereotypical

view of Blacks as intellectual primitives, a residue of Britain's long imperial history and

a popular culture saturated with racist images of Africa and other colonized areas.[28] The

second stanza brings the voice of LKJ to the fore, but he continues to articulate the

bragging claims of the neo-fascists concerning their violent victimization of the Asian

and Black communities in Britain. These descriptions of chilling violence are not purely

rhetorical; thirty-one Black and Asian people were beaten to death in Britain between

1976 and 1981.[29] In the third stanza, LKJ shifts from this focus on neo-fascist violence

and adopts the persona of a young Black militant. The threats uttered in first and third

person in the previous stanzas are met with consummate cool by this persona, who, faced

with the fascist threat, confidently states that "noh baddah worry 'bout dat" [nobody's

worried about that]. The speaker's lack of alarm in the face of neo-fascist terror and his

confidence in the Black community's ability to meet racist violence with effective

resistance is a striking affirmation of collective power. "Fite Dem Back" testifies to the

acuity of Frantz Fanon's discussion of the humanizing effect of counter-violence within a

context of racial domination and terror.[30] When the "smash their brains in" refrain

repeats at the end of the poem, it embodies the confident threat of retaliatory violence

from the Black community rather than white terror.

       In addition to neo-fascist cadres, the Black community also had to contend with

quotidian assaults by the forces of the state during this period. In *Policing the Crisis*,

Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies anatomized

the transformation of the state that occurred in the 1970s.[31] Drawing on the work of

political theorist Nicos Poulantzas, Hall provides a structural analysis of the new form of

state that evolved in reaction to the crisis of hegemony within the social-democratic

nations of Western Europe during the 1970s. According to this analysis, a breakdown of

the hegemonic consensus in these countries occurred as a result of the state's inability to

reconcile the competing interests - private accumulation and public consent - that it had

absorbed in the course of the second half of the twentieth century. During the counter-

cultural movement of the 1960s, the superstructures of the liberal post-war welfare state

had come under attack from new social movements such as feminism, Black power, and

the student movement, which indicted the forms of institutional discrimination and hypocrisy that characterized post-war social democracy. At the same time, the increasingly flexible forms of accumulation and the transnational organizational structures that were coming to characterize the capitalist system during the 1970s overwhelmed the state's mechanisms of social engineering.[32] By 1976, British capitalism was in full-blown crisis. The OPEC oil embargo had decimated the nation's manufacturing sector, massive strike waves were toppling ineffectual governments with increasing frequency, and the International Monetary Fund had imposed a regime of fiscal austerity on the country that augured the notorious Structural Adjustment Policies meted out to underdeveloped countries during the 1980s.[33] Consent, as Hall and his colleagues put it, was exhausted. For Hall, the state turned to an ideology of "law and order" in order to secure its legitimacy.[34] Coercion against "ethnic minority" populations thus secured the consent of the white majority for the state. This "popular authoritarianism," as Hall called it, had an inescapably racial upshot. The principle elements of Enoch Powell's race-baiting "Rivers of Blood" speech of 1968, in which the future of the nation was tied to its racial purity, came, during the 1970s, to be part of mainstream discourses that operated through a symbolic politics of prophylaxis. British public discourse was suffused with a racism that was, as Étienne Balibar has argued, a conflictual relation to the state which was "lived distortedly" and "projected" as a relation to the racial Other.[35]

The popular authoritarian ideology that characterized the 1970s cast Britain's Black and Asian communities, the great majority of whom lived in the most economically marginal urban areas of the nation, as the greatest threat to the nation's

tranquility. Of course, this ideology effectively obscured the structural components of Britain's economic and social crisis. If racist ideologues like Powell used the presence of Blacks in Britain to explain the nation's post-war economic decline, the ideology of law and order blamed the social crises ignited by this decline on the very people who were its greatest victims. Reviving the Victorian-era "sus" laws that allowed police to arrest those they suspected of criminal intent without any evidence, the police force became an increasingly aggressive presence in the decaying urban areas where Blacks had been forced to settle during the post-war period. Tensions inevitably escalated between the police and Black communities, providing greater justification for the ideology of "law and order" in official eyes. As the British police adopted the military-style strategies developed by their American colleagues during the urban conflagrations of the late 1960's and early 70's in the U.S., Black neighborhoods came to seem increasingly like battle zones, subjected to the "heavy manners" of an occupying army. Black youths in particular could not walk openly on the streets of British cities without courting arbitrary arrest.[36]

Perhaps the most powerful poem in *Inglan is a Bitch*, "Sonny's Lettah" conveys the damage wrought by the "sus" laws on Black communities during this period. In this poem, LKJ adopts the persona of Sonny, a young Black man writing a letter to his mother from Brixton prison after being arrested in an altercation that followed the police's unwarranted attempt to arrest his younger brother.[37] Countering the stereotypical views of black criminality and violence that were essential components of the moral panic that attended popular authoritarianism, LKJ humanizes Sonny by narrating his devotion to his family:

Mama,

I really doan know how fi tell y'u dis,

cause I did mek a salim pramis [solemn promise]

fi tek care a lickle Jim

an' try mi bes' fi look out fi him (7)

After this melancholy and introspective description of his failed attempt to care for his younger brother, LKJ's Sonny shifts into a narrative of the events that led to his inadvertent murder of one of the three police officers who assaulted his brother. In this account, LKJ uses alliteration and end-rhyme in order to emphasize the ferocity of the police attack on Jim and the corresponding violence of Sonny's own response:

dem t'ump him in him belly

an' it turn to jelly

dem lick him pan him back

an' him rib get pap

dem lick him pan him he'd

but it tuff like le'd

dem kick him in him seed

an' it started to bleed

Mama,

Ah jus' could'n' stand-up deh

an' noh dhu not'n':

soh mi jook one in him eye

an' him started to cry;

mi t'ump one in him mout'

an' him started to shout

mi kick one pan him shin

an' him started to spin

mi t'ump him pan him chin

an' him drap pan a bin

an' crash

an de'd. (8-9)

The propulsive forward rhythm provided by LKJ's collaboration with the Dub Band is

employed to remarkable effect in this song, which emphasizes the surge of violence

precipitated by the police attack. The music comes to a full stop during Sonny's direct

comments to his mother, and then picks up again as he describes the unfolding events.

LKJ spares no details in his description of the brutalizing impact of unprovoked police

violence. Just as in "Fite Dem Back," LKJ underlines the refusal of members of the

Black community to accept British state violence meekly by describing Sonny's response

to the police attack. Unlike the former poem, however, "Sonny's Lettah" acknowledges

the oppressive impact of institutional racism within the police force and the judicial

system.[38] Sonny is now locked up in Brixton jail with little apparent hope of appeal

against the biased system that landed him behind bars. This poem is the first one

included in the collection *Inglan is a Bitch*, where it is printed next to a photograph of

LKJ in front of a 'Free Darcus Howe" poster. The poster's motto - "self-defense is no offense" - suggests that the Black community not only experienced repeated attacks from both police and neo-fascists, but that they were engaged in campaigns during this period to challenge the bias of a judiciary that refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of resistant counter-violence.[39] Nevertheless, the tone of triumphant resistance found in later poems like "Fite Dem Back" and "Forces of Victory" is modulated in this poem by the note of somber reflection introduced in Sonny's meditation on his failure to protect his younger brother. LKJ's poem provides us with a poignant insight into the painful emotions felt by Sonny as he sits isolated in his cell. His signature, which LKJ of course speaks aloud on the album, suggests his stoic endurance in the face of state racism: "I remain, / your son, / Sonny" (9).

Within this embattled context, activists in the Black community came to see the carnival as a crucially important instance of collective solidarity and resistance. Adopting the Fanonian analysis that had inspired the Black Panthers in the United States, groups such as the Race Today collective described black neighborhoods as internal colonies.[40] Identification with the colonial condition meant, in this context, the articulation of a political analysis of the underdevelopment, oppression, and super-exploitation that affected racial minorities in developed urban capitalist conditions.[41] To overcome the colonized mentality and police brutality that prevailed under these conditions, activists such as the Black Panthers in the U.S. and Race Today in the U.K. developed a politics of militant resistance within the defensive space of the ghetto. For the Race Today collective, the carnival route consequently became a "liberated space," an autonomous zone within which the black community could assert its prerogative to

occupy public space in Britain.[42] The historical connection between the carnival and the white riots of 1958 lent support to this perception. In addition, the massive and belligerent police presence following the 1975 carnival seemed to confirm the argument that the state saw black culture *per se* as a threat.

The victorious celebration of carnival during the mid- to late-1970s was possible largely because of the coalescence of the Black community effected through the integration of sound systems. In 1975, the organizers of the festival, the Carnival Development Committee (CDC), decided to include sound systems along the procession's route for the first time. While steel pan bands, mas' camps, and calypso all originate in Trinidadian culture, sound systems are a characteristic and fundamental component of Jamaican and Jamaican diasporic youth cultures. A sound system is an assemblage of massive, often home made speakers, a powerful amplifier, a number of turntables, and a DJ who "toasts" or raps over the music she or he is playing. By including sound systems in the carnival procession, the CDC turned the festival into a pan-Caribbean affair. Of course, the kinds of cultural differences that characterized immigrants from different nations in the Caribbean had been mitigated from the start by processes of racialization in Britain that made such differences seem trivial. However, it was not until the carnival of 1975 that this pan-Caribbean unity became a dominant facet of the Black public sphere in Britain and facilitated commensurate efforts of political organization. There were initial tensions over the logistics of this pan-Caribbean event. Mobile Trinidadian steel pan bands, for instance, expressed fears that their music would be drowned out by the booming bass tones of the stationary Jamaican sound systems.

However, these fears were quickly overshadowed by the police force's attempts to shut down carnival.

Spitting out defiance of the popular authoritarianism that victimized Black communities in the 1970s, the title track of LKJ's *Forces of Victory* serves both as a remembrance of Black people's historical resistance to the racist state and as an active performance of a counter-hegemonic Black aesthetic:

> we're di forces af vict'ry
>
> an' wi comin' rite through
>
> we're di forces af vict'ry
>
> now wat y'u gonna do
>
>
> wi mek a lickle date
>
> fi nineteen-seventy-eight
>
> an' we fite an' wi fite
>
> an' defeat di State
>
> den all a wi jus' forwud
>
> up to Not'n' Hill Gate
>
> den all a wi jus' forwud
>
> up to Not'n' Hill Gate (22)

"Forces of Victory" demonstrates the clear understanding among radical sectors of the Black population that their struggle is ultimately against the state.[43] The battle to preserve carnival in Britain made the role of the state in catalyzing other forms of oppression such as neo-fascist violence completely clear. LKJ's poem reenacts the Black

community's triumphant defeat of police efforts to shut down the carnival in 1976 and 1977, using this triumph as a broader symbol of Black resistance to the oppressive conditions established by popular authoritarianism.

The emphasis on public performance that characterizes all of the poems in *Inglan is a Bitch* is particularly evident in "Forces of Victory." In the preceding quotation, for instance, the speaker adopts a defiant tone towards the un-named "y'u" of the poem, a second person plural which can only refer in this context to the police forces. There is nothing, as the speaker proclaims, that these forces can do to stop the carnival performers from parading along their planned route, a route which traces - at least for a couple of days - the geography of collective black solidarity. The ability to clear a path round the entire neighborhood of Notting Hill is an instance of what the geographer Neil Smith has called "jumping spatial scales" as a mode of empowerment.[44] As Smith explains, the hierarchical production of spatial scale means that individuals and communities are increasingly deprived not simply of movement from place to place, but of access to the broader spatial scales where power is choreographed. If the British state increasingly sought to contain black communities spatially through aggressive policing practices that curtailed their geographical mobility and criminalized certain forms of dress, hairstyle, and even ways of walking, the carnival allowed these communities to reoccupy their streets and neighborhoods. The Caribbean origins of carnival also suggest another form of scale jumping, this time through repossession of the resources of hope embedded in diasporic histories of resistance and rebellion.

In addition to this overt celebration of victorious resistance, the speaker of LKJ's poem adopts a teasing, ironic tone in the penultimate stanza of the poem. Despite the

heavy subject matter dealt with in LKJ's dub poetry, he frequently varies the tone within particular poems. Like a classic trickster, the speaker in "Forces of Victory" expresses sympathy for the sufferings of those he has hoodwinked. His words of mock consolation merely underline the momentum acquired by the forces of victory:

> beg y'u call a physician
>
> fi di poor opposition
>
> dem gat no ammunition
>
> an' dem gat no position (23)

LKJ's reference to "ammunition" and "position" in this stanza playfully puns on the military metaphors that permeate the poem. The "opposition" has been so thoroughly defeated that they no longer have any of the logistical resources for warfare. In addition, however, the forces arrayed against carnival also have no moral ammunition or position to draw on. The mocking tone of this stanza and its derisory references to the political establishment draw attention to the hypocrisy of government attempts to shut down the Notting Hill carnival in the name of public order. Like the police force's "sus" laws, such forms of spatial control were predicated on racial stereotypes, creating disorder in what was a highly organized public celebration of Black community and solidarity.

LKJ's poem in fact effects a metaphorical inversion of the internal colonization suffered by Black Britons at this time. The Race Today Renegades mas' band [masquerade group] based their costumes in 1978 on the guerrilla outfits of the revolutionary anti-colonial movements of the era.[45] Mimicking the popular mobilizations in colonized nations such as Mozambique or Vietnam, the Renegades parade their defiance of what is seen as an imperial power structure:

wi comin' wid wi army

soh don't y'u get balmy

wi comin' wid wi plane

it gonna drive y'u insane

wi comin' wid wi guns

an' wi mekin wi roun's

wi comin' wid wi tank

an' Babylan get vank [beaten] (23)

With their masquerade army, complete with wooden guns and papier-mâché tanks and planes, the Race Today Renegades sought to vanquish the forces of racism (a.k.a. "Babylon") using style, parody, and performance. Rupturing the European tradition of separating politics from aesthetics, the "Force of Victory" theme transformed the street fighting of the previous two years into a celebration of Black identity.[46] Of course, on an explicit level the mas' theme of the Race Today Renegades refers to the inability of the police to shut down carnival during the two previous years. However, the hyperbolic pantomime of autonomous national identity resonates more broadly with the instances of resistance to state and fascist coercion that proliferated within the Black and Asian communities during the late 1970s. By performing an alternative, militantly autonomous set of identities into being, the Race Today Renegades mas' band and LKJ's poetic evocation of their actions challenged the state's arrogation of legitimate violence on a symbolic plane.

Conclusion: New Ethnicities and Polycultural Politics

The militaristic theme adopted by the Race Today Renegades suggests a level of uniformity and homogeneity within the Black community against which the structure of the carnival militates. Carnival is, after all, made up of a number of competing mas' bands, each adopting its own theme. As a result, the carnival is a particularly interesting site to investigate the evolving identities and political strategies that characterized the Black community in Britain during this period. Such an examination reveals the extent to which monolithic conceptions of Black culture were contested. 1977, for example, saw the organization of the Lion Youth mas' band by a group of women who had grown frustrated by the male chauvinism that characterized carnival culture.[47] As one of the founders of this mas' band stated, women were the predominant organizers and laborers in the mas' camps, and yet they were systematically excluded from the planning of the bands' themes each year. Lion Youth became the first all woman mas' band. The band was, like LKJ's dub poetry, a product of the forms of cultural reconstruction and transnational linkage that characterize the struggles of the period to forge a vernacular aesthetic. Emerging from London's George Padmore and William Sylvester schools, institutions founded by Black parents who felt the British school system was purposely under- and mis-educating their children, the Lion Youth mas' band transformed the masquerade elements of carnival into investigations of African diasporic heritage.[48] By embracing politicized and carefully researched African and diasporic themes each year, mas' bands like Lion Youth were consciously moving away from the Trinidadian "butterfly" tradition, which had by the 1970s become commodified and touristic.[49] Lion Youth mas' band offers a fascinating instance of the pedagogic role of popular culture, developing mas' themes centering, for example, on the rebellious Saramacen slave

communities of Guyana and the syncretic religious practices associated with the Black

Madonna.[50] In 1978, Lion Youth adopted a theme similar to that of the Race Today

Renegades, using a sound system named Peoples' War to provide musical

accompaniment to their marching. Their emphasis on historical research is, however,

evident in the African background to their theme: "Guerrilla completing Shaka's task."

Moreover, their presence in the streets of Notting Hill marked a significant challenge to

the traditional male domination of carnival.

Far from consolidating a monolithic conception of the Black community in binary

opposition to the forces of white racism, carnival helped to promote dialogue and

contestation around Black identities. The model of monolithic community implicit in

much Black nationalist thought of the previous decade was, in other words, actively

challenged through the cultural activism of groups such as the Lion Youth mas' band. In

his discussion of work produced by Black film and video collectives of the Thatcher era

such as Ceddo and Sankofa, Stuart Hall theorized this profusion of difference as the

advent of "new ethnicities."[51] According to Hall, the undifferentiated black subject

constructed in the course of struggles to gain access to representation for marginalized

communities needed to be challenged, for this subject was implicitly male and

heterosexual. Consequently, Hall proclaims the "end of the essential black subject" and a

corollary recognition of "the immense diversity and differentiation of ... black subjects."[52]

Compelling as Hall's account of this shift is, the history of carnival suggests that such

challenges to monolithic conceptions of collective identity have a long prehistory. As a

form that is grounded in the vernacular aesthetics of the Caribbean diaspora, the Notting

Hill carnival has offered a complex politics of identity and spatiality since its inception.

The Notting Hill carnival was thus an important venue in the consolidation of new ethnicities in post-war Britain. Linton Kwesi Johnson's dub poetry, which played a key role in projecting Black identities into the public sphere, offers us an important record of the cultural politics of this pivotal period in British history.

<u>Notes:</u>

1. For a history of these overlapping currents in the Black radical tradition, see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (New York: Zed, 1983).

2. For details concerning LKJ's involvement with CAM, see Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon, 1992).

3. Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Rebel Music," *Race and Class* (1974): 398.

4. Ibid, p. 411.

5. LKJ's collaboration with Dennis Bovell and his Dub Band did not solidify until *Forces of Victory*.

6. Editorial statement, *Race Today*, May/June 1978.

7. Abner Cohen's definition of carnival as "a cultural mechanism expressing, camouflaging, and alleviating a basic structural conflict between the state and the citizenry" (132). For further details, see his *Masquerade Politics: Explorations in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993). The seminal expression of carnival's ambiguous social role remains, of course, that of Bakhtin. See his *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomingdale, IN: Indiana UP, 1984) as well as work inspired by him such as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986).

8. See Kwesi Owusu and Jacob Ross, *Behind the Masquerade: The Story of the Notting Hill Carnival* (London: Arts Media Group, 1988), where carnival is defined as "the celebration of emergence, an affirmation of survival and continuity, the destruction of the imposed semantic mould," p. 39.

9. Mas' bands such as Lion Youth and People's War sponsor a serious educational program, including newsletters, slide shows, and talks to elaborate on their chosen theme in the run-up to carnival.

10. The best history of carnival to date is John Cowley's *Carnival, Canboulay, and Calypso* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1996).

11. Cecil Gutzmore, "Carnival, the State, and the Black Masses in the United Kingdom," Kwesi Owusu, ed. *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 334.

12. David Rudder, *Kaiso, Calypso Music* (London: New Beacon, 1990), p. 19.

13. For a discussion of creole participation in the Asian Hosay festival in Trinidad, see Prashad (2001).

14. For a discussion of particular instances of such riots, see John Cowley (1996).

15. This argument is lent weight by contemporary perceptions of "carnival as the most important, independently organized, social and political activity by West Indians in Britain." See Race Today Collective, *The Road Make To Walk on Carnival Day: The Battle for the West Indian Carnival in Britain* (London: Race Today, 1977).

16. It should, however, be noted that carnival was also the occasion for significant infighting within the Black community. For example, in an essay on carnival, Cecil Gutzmore accuses Race Today of "perfidy and political opportunism" in their dealings with the different factions vieing for control of the carnival during the mid-1970s. See

Cecil Gutzmore, "Carnival, the State, and the Black Masses in the United Kingdom," *The Black Liberator* (1978).

17. Carnival is thus a perfect example of the dialogic aesthetic forms that Paul Gilroy argues characterize Black diasporic cultures. See *There Ain't No Black*, pp. 164-65.

18. Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: Radius, 1978), p. 32.

19. The groundbreaking anatomy of such atavistic politics is Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1983). For a more focused discussion of these issues in a British context, see Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (New York: Verso, 1985).

20. For a discussion of the role of "places of memory" in codifying national identity, see Ian Baucom's *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999).

21. For a discussion of the deplorable housing stock in Notting Hill, see Kwesi Owusu and Jacob Ross, *Behind the Masquerade: The Story of the Notting Hill Carnival* (London; Arts Media Group, 1988).

22. The white riots of 1958 are discussed in Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill Riots* (London: Tauris, 1988).

23. The origin of the carnival has been the subject of some controversy of late. For a definitive substantiation of the argument that Claudia Jones helped found the carnival, see Marika Sherwood et. al., *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999).

24. Quoted in Sherwood, p. 157.

25. Cohen, p. 23.

26. Cohen, p. 93.

27. See David Widgery's discussion of the National Front's "anti-mugging" march in Lewisham in *Beating Time: Riot'n'Race'n'Rock'n'Roll* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986), p. 44.

28. For an analysis of racist stereotypes in imperial popular culture, see John M. MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Dover, NH: Manchester U P, 1986).

29. David Widgery, *Beating Time*, 17.

30. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968).

31. Stuart Hall et. al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: MacMillan, 1978).

32. Probably the best overview of the cultural shifts associated with these political-economic changes is David Harvey's *The Conditions of Post-Modernism* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

33. For a detailed analysis of these developments, see Colin Leys, *Politics in Britain: From Labourism to Thatcherism* (New York: Verso, 1989).

34. Hall, pp. 309-322.

35. Étienne Balibar, "'Es Gibt Keinen Staat in Europa:' Racism and Politics in Europe Today," *New Left Review* 186 (1991), pp. 5-19.

36. For example, the para-military Special Patrol Group (SPG) stopped 14,000 people on the streets of the London borough of Lewisham and made 400 arrests in 1975. For more information on racist policing practices, see Institute of Race Relations, *Police Against Black People* (London, 1979).

37. "Sonny's Lettah" was based on LKJ's own experiences after he was arrested for trying to take down identification information of a group of police officers he saw choking a man to death on the street in London. LKJ was place in the back of a police van along with three other people who had been picked up on "suspicion" that they were about to commit a crime. All four were then beaten savagely by the police. For an account of the incident, see Caryl Phillips, "Prophet in Another Land" *The Guardian Weekend*, 11 July 1998.

38. After years of resistance to the notion of institutional racism, the Macpherson report that followed the repeatedly botched investigations into the murder of Stephen Lawrence finally admitted the existence of widespread racial bias within the police force, the judiciary, and other institutional sectors of British society. For a discussion of the report, see Jenny Bourne (2002).

39. "Sonny's Lettah" may also be linked to the landmark case of the Mangrove 9, a group of Black activists who successfully defended themselves against police charges of "riot, affray, and assault" after they resisted a violence police attack on a demonstration outside the Mangrove restaurant. Located in Notting Hill, the Mangrove was a vital Black cultural center that the police repeatedly raided and ultimately tried to close. For a discussion of this case, see A. Sivanandan, *From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1986.

40. Race Today Collective, *The Road Make To Walk on Carnival Day: The Battle for the West Indian Carnival in Britain* (London: Race Today, 1977).

41. Hall, *Policing the Crisis*, pp. 386-389.

42. In his discussion of Salman Rushdie's representation of the riots of the 1980s in *The Satanic Verses*, Ian Baucom relates this claim to public space to the kinds of English traditions of disorderly conduct described by New Left historians such as E.P. Thompson. Contemporary accounts by groups such as Race Today indicate, however, that there is a far stronger link with anti-colonial and diasporic uprisings than with purely English traditions of dissent.

43. A group of residents in the borough of Kensington lobbied councillors and the police to ban the carnival after the disruptions of 1975. Attempts by the Carnival Development Committee to negotiate with this group got nowhere. However, the police proved highly responsive to the group's calls to maintain "British law and order" by banning the carnival. In the context of harassment that pervaded Britain's urban areas, it's clear that the clash with this group was part of a much broader struggle with popular authoritarianism.

44. Neil Smith, "Homeless/Global: Scaling Places," Jon Bird, ed. *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 103.

45. This explanation is included on the LP *Linton Kwesi Johnson in Concert with the Dub Band* (1986).

46. Carnival Costumes Secretary Larry Forde criticized the Social Workers Party for their 1977 float "Victory to Freedom Fighters in South Africa", which featured a frozen scene of black guerrillas pointing their guns at two white settlers in chains, not for the violence of the imagery but for their failure to contribute to the festive atmosphere of carnival. See Larry Forde, "Arresting Changes," *New Society* (September 1977), p. 441.

47. Owusu and Ross, p. 64.

48. Owusu and Ross, p. 65.

49. For a critique of the Trinidad carnival's commodification, see Earl Lovelace's novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*.

50. The performances of Lion Youth were intended to educate not just spectators but members of the mas' band themselves about their Caribbean and African heritage.

51. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

52. Hall, p. 443.