

“Here to Stay”: The Performance of Accents in the Work of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Lemn Sissay

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Introduction

In his study *Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy uses the term “accent” to designate a new cinematic genre. This genre, which includes diasporic, ethnic and exilic films, is characterized by a specific “accented” style. In his analysis of “accented style,” Naficy broadens the term “accent” to refer not only to speech but also to “the film’s deep structure: its narrative visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot” (Naficy 23). Thus, the term “accent” describes an audible characteristic of speech but can also be applied to describe many characteristics of artistic products that originate in a particular community.

“Accented films” reflect the dislocation of their authors through migration or exile. According to Naficy, the filmmakers operate “in the interstices of cultures and film practices” (4). Thus, Naficy argues, “accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices” (4). Naficy’s use of the term interstice refers back to Homi Bhabha, who argues that cultural change originates in the interstices between different cultures. Interstices are the result of “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (Bhabha 2). In the interstice, “social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition” (3). Thus, the development of alternative styles and models of cultures, and the questioning of the cultures that dominate the space outside the interstice is encouraged. The questions that are being raised, and the alternative forms of cultures that are being developed in the interstices, reflect back on “the political *conditions* of the present” (Bhabha 3) and “open[s] up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

In the following, I will explore the relationship between Naficy's and Bhabha's spatial metaphors of cultural politics and the work of two British poets: Linton Kwesi Johnson and Lemn Sissay. Through an analysis of their work, I will interrogate, refine and develop Bhabha and Naficy's arguments around the "interstice" as a conceptual framework for understanding the specificity of minority cultural politics.

Linton Kwesi Johnson (hereafter LKJ) was born in 1952 in Kingston, Jamaica, where he spent the first 11 years of his life. He initially lived with his parents in Kingston and then, when his mother went to England to look for a better job, in the Jamaican countryside with his grandmother. At the age of 11, LKJ followed his mother to England and lived with her in Brixton. While still at school he joined the Black Panthers. At this time, he developed his first literary aspirations, discovering Black literature and meeting up with other young people interested in writing, to discuss their texts. He eventually got together with a reggae group called Rasta Love and in close co-operation with them developed some of the poems that were later released on his first CD, entitled *Dread Beat an Blood* (1978). The poems are examples of the genre of "dub poetry." "Dub poetry," the major representatives of which, besides LKJ, include Jean Binta Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah, Michael Smith, Mutabaraku and others, refers to poetry that is performed to a reggae track. The words are spoken over the reggae track. When the track is removed the reggae rhythm remains in the poetry. LKJ himself coined the term "dub poetry" during his studies of sociology at Goldsmith's College. At that time, he was working on a sociological analysis of reggae and used the term "dub lyricism" to refer to reggae DJs as poets because he viewed them as "people doing...spontaneous oral poetry, documenting what was happening in a society at a particular time" (Harris and White 60). LKJ sees his task as a poet along similar lines. He points out that he started writing in order to give voice to the concerns of his community:

My initial impetus to write had nothing to do with a feel for poetry or a grounding in poetry, rather it was an urgency to express the anger and the frustrations and the hopes and the aspirations of my generation growing up in this country under the shadow of racism. (qtd. in Caesar 62)

Consequently, LKJ has always combined his work as a poet with his work as a political activist, first with the Black Panthers and later with the Race Today Collective.

Lemn Sissay was born in Wigan in 1967 to Ethiopian parents. His mother was a student and his father a pilot. After his birth, he was given up for adoption and was initially raised by a white foster family in Lancashire. At the age of 11, the family returned him to social care. He remained in children's homes until he was 18. Eventually he tracked down his natural parents, discovering that his father had died in a plane crash when Sissay himself was five years old and that his mother had returned to Ethiopia, got married, and eventually accompanied her husband into exile to the U.S., where she still lives. Sissay has worked as a poet and as a TV and radio

presenter. He is famous for his poetry readings and has frequently worked with jazz and club musicians. Sissay currently lives in Manchester.

Among other reasons, I chose the work of these two particular poets as case studies for this paper because of their different backgrounds. LKJ comes from a diasporic community. Born and brought up in a former British colony, when he arrived in England he was old enough to perceive and consciously experience the difference between his “home” culture and English culture. He belongs to a generation of Blacks who, as he himself says, realized at an early age they had come to England to stay. Confronted with a pervasive and visible racism in British society, they had to struggle to be respected as a community in their own right that was nevertheless part of British society.

Sissay, on the other hand, was born in Britain and grew up among white people. He did not see another black person until he was 15 years old. Whereas British society emphasized LKJ's identity as a black person, Sissay's identity as a black person was denied, even though other peoples' reactions towards him were influenced by an underlying racism that his poetry bears witness to. Unlike LKJ, whose goal is to give voice to the concerns of his community, Sissay had to find an identity and, if possible, a community. The struggle to find or construct his own roots and identity is a powerful subtext in his poetry collections *Rebel Without Applause* (1992) and *Morning Breaks in the Elevator* (1999).

Another reason for my choice is that both LKJ and Sissay are famous *performers* of their poetry. Performed poetry foregrounds the performer's accent, and performing with music (as both poets frequently do) adds another dimension of “accenting.” Music can accent spoken word poetry by highlighting speech rhythms and speech melody. It can also foreground cultural values, which is how LKJ uses reggae. In this sense, accents can be “one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as of individual difference and personality” (Naficy 23). In his 1996 article on British Performance Poetry “Vive la différence!” Paul Beasley interprets the accent in a similar way:

it is often the case that accent or dialect is offered up not only as a ‘natural fact’ but as a political issue – in explicit defiance of pressure to conform to standard expectations or obviate it in more abstract or formalistic concerns. Instead it is all the more foregrounded – celebrated as a key component in the poet's individual and group identity. (Beasley 29)

Both Naficy and Beasley interpret the foregrounding of accents in cultural products – films and poetry – as a reaffirmation of cultures and identities that are under pressure to conform to another, dominant culture. While I agree that the performance of accents can fulfill the positive functions of community affirmation, community building and community defense, Beasley's and Naficy's analyses are problematic in one respect. They both base their argument on the existence of an “official” accent. Their accented poets and filmmakers deviate from this accent and in doing so perform a

different identity and an act of resistance against the pressure to conform. Neither Beasley nor Naficy address questions like the following: Who decides what the “official” accent is? And once there is one, can it be changed? If an accent inevitably indicates a deviation in some sense, even if it is a positive one, then those who decide which is the “official” accent and which is not are assigned the power to decide on what is normal and, consequently, on what is strange. For which reasons are such decisions made and by whom? And who conferred this authority on the decision-makers? These questions gain urgency when one takes into account that the people who are recognizable as strangers by their accent have come to a place to stay. If the “original” culture keeps conceiving of them and their cultural practices as “accented,” is this not an attempt at exclusion? How are power relations in a society affected if the strict division between an “original” and its divergent accents is maintained?

My second question concerns the concept of space. Naficy describes accented filmmakers as situated in what he calls interstices. The metaphor indicates to me that these filmmakers do not live in the same space as the people that inhabited this region previously. Are the accented artists squeezed into the interstice or suspended in the act of straddling the interstices because they are not welcome in this other place that has no name, or do they embrace the position they are in? The choice of withdrawal into the interstice or a move into the unnamed, previously inhabited “spaces” turns out to be a crucial question in representing and analyzing “accented cultures.” At stake is the question of how different cultures coexisting in the same region negotiate their contacts with each other, and of how “accented” cultures negotiate their contacts with their surroundings.

In his discussion of Third Cinema aesthetics Naficy makes several points about “accented cinema” and its relationship to its surroundings. He does so by contrasting “accented cinema” with Third Cinema:

As a cinema of displacement, however, the accented cinema is much more situated than the Third Cinema, for it is necessarily made by (and often for) specific displaced subjects and diasporized communities. Less polemical than the Third Cinema, it is nevertheless a political cinema that stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression. If Third Cinema films generally advocated class struggle and armed struggle, accented films favor discursive and semiotic struggles. Although not necessarily Marxist or even socialist like the Third Cinema, the accented cinema is an engagé cinema. (Naficy 30–31)

In this passage, Naficy explicitly constructs an opposition. He first establishes that accented cinema is “much more situated” because its production and its address are specific subjects and communities, not the general public. He then characterizes the address of Third Cinema to the general public as polemical. In defining the Third Cinema as polemical, “socialist or even Marxist” and as advocating political struggle, and in opposing Third Cinema to the “much more situated,” more specific, political,

engagé and discursively and semiotically struggling “accented cinema,” Naficy suggests that one is *either* group-specific or advocates concrete political demands, that one *either* advocates concrete strategies of political struggle or engages in discursive and semiotic struggles. Naficy seems to suggest that an art form is more successful when it is *not* polemical and does *not* put forward any concrete political strategies, but *instead* engages in discursive and semiotic struggles and is directed mainly towards its own community. It is nevertheless morally equally astute because it takes a general stand against authoritarianism and oppression. Comparing the two cinemas in terms of such a contradiction allows Naficy to separate style from content and to subordinate content to style because style in terms of Naficy’s analysis becomes a performance of basic political demands and attitudes.

Such an approach is problematic in two respects. The first problem concerns the relation between goals and targets. Taking a general stand against authoritarianism and oppression might be enough if the “accented culture” does not seek to move into the space of the “host” society and is not under attack from it. However, the moment a group comes under attack it will have to develop some kind of strategy to concretely defend its rights and, in doing so, engage in a – possibly unfriendly or even openly antagonistic – contact with its surroundings. Such a strategy will necessarily have to include some form of address and a precise formulation of demands that is directed towards the outside and, as a consequence, has two aspects. One aspect would be the reaffirmation of the identity of the “accented culture.” The second aspect would be the development of political strategies in interaction with the reaffirmation of that identity. In his comparative analysis of Third Cinema and “accented cinema” Naficy stops short of the second aspect. The reason he implicitly gives is that he associates the only concrete strategies he mentions – class struggle and armed struggle – with polemics. On these grounds he dismisses them. Instead of analyzing whether the discursive and semiotic struggles of “accented cinema” lead to alternative strategies of engagement, he seems to consider the development of such strategies obsolete because for him the reaffirmation of a cultural identity is already a political statement. However, a statement does not necessarily solicit a response and is thus something entirely different than a demand. By not making this distinction, Naficy’s argument leads to a seeming politicization of the discursive and semiotic struggles of “accented cinema,” but it does so by sacrificing concrete political demands.

The second problem has to do with style. An “accented style” can be an expression of cultural identity. But, as Peter Hitchcock points out in his article “Decolonizing (the) English,” it can be easily appropriated by the culture it seeks to affirm itself against. Hitchcock points out that

the nature of racism, which also finds its way into multiculturalism, includes the fetish of the other, the desire of the other, which must disavow the other’s desire yet

simultaneously make the other “palatable” as Fanon puts it. It is not just a psychic process, which is often how both Fanon and Marx are misread on the question of the fetish: it is a concrete invitation to otherness to sustain the subject that otherwise denies the other. (763)

“Accented” cultural products might therefore be perfectly acceptable for the “unaccented” culture because they provide an example against which the “unaccented” culture can define itself. As Hitchcock puts it, much “is indeed palatable in that it places cultural difference in proximity yet simultaneously sustains an idea of nation that remains exclusionary” (764).

Hitchcock raises the question of “whether what reviles and desires is overly upset by a stylish intervention” (764), if such stylish interventions are not “concerned with a cultural politics that would, in appropriating ‘being British,’ disrupt the race and class hierarchies that have secured colonial and colonizing epistemes” (764). Such cultural products question and redefine what it means to “be British” and as a consequence call for serious changes in society’s perception of its cultural identity because they establish “the right to lead in cultural matters, the right to export a collective identity in such a way that borders are not effaced, but enhanced” (Brennan 687).

Style + Content

The poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson is a case in point. It exemplifies a product of an “accented” culture that sees itself as under attack by the “unaccented” culture of the country they both share. To voice his community’s concerns, LKJ uses its traditional speech patterns and rhythms. “Dub poetry,” with its base in reggae, expresses certain cultural values and class alignments. Reggae has played a crucial role in developing a Caribbean cultural identity because it is tied up not only with a particular rhythm but also with a dialect, and it first became commercially successful through the sound systems that operated in Kingston’s ghettos. In his study of reggae, *Bass Culture*, Lloyd Bradley places Linton Kwesi Johnson within this mixture of rhythm, music, dialect and politics:

Linton’s poetry was an intrinsically Jamaican medium, dating back to long before roots deejays took it upon themselves to sound genuinely Jamaican. Dialect poetry and plays had been performed by black Jamaicans since the days of slavery as a way to establish some form of cultural identity and send up the planters and their flunkys back in the slave quarters. Dramatist, actress, orator and dialect poet Louise “Miss Lou” Bennett is probably roots poetry’s most famous exponent, moving seamlessly from folk tales to sly (and not so sly) sideswipes at authority...African anthem meets sugar plantation work song meets revivalist meeting meets dubwise. Which is the point at which Linton took it up and added riddim and a large helping of black British political awareness. (Bradley 436–37)

Embedded in this tradition, LKJ shifted the emphasis between language and music. He got together with musician Dennis Bovell and the two started recording, putting LKJ's poems to music instead of speaking poetry over an already existing track:

This was like toasting, but approached from completely the opposite direction inasmuch as the music was written to fit the words...In this way, stories could be told and points made with far more clarity and precision than if the main concern was riding the rhythm. (Bradley 437)

The texts themselves are performed in a mixture of Caribbean and British English or, as Bradley puts it, in "an easily understood textbook patois" (Bradley 437). The content of LKJ's poetry is thus accessible to English and Caribbean listeners alike.

LKJ's poetry is characterized by a fusion of style and content. The poem "It Dread Inna Innglan," for example, is dedicated to George Lindo, a black man from Bradford who was framed by the police for a robbery. LKJ joined the campaign for his release and, in his poem, emphasizes the ability of his community to take care of its concerns by itself:

*dem frame-up George Lindo
up in Bradford Toun
but di Bradford Blacks
dem a rally roun*

*mi se dem frame-up George Lindo
up in Bradford Toun
but di Bradford Blacks
dem a rally roun...*

*Maggi Thatcha on di go
Wid a racist show
But a she haffi go
Kaw,
Rite now,
African
Asian
West Indian
An' Black British
Stan firm inna Innglan
Inna disya time yah*

*Far no mattah wat dey say,
Come wat may,
We are here to stay
Inna Innglan,
Inna disya time yah...*

The seemingly simple structure and the repetition in the first two stanzas make the poem a powerful and effective articulation of a particular political demand – freedom for George Lindo – but the poem also places this demand within the context of the representation of the broader concerns of the Black community in England.

The poem states and performs, and hence demonstrates in logic as well as style that black people are perfectly able to defend their rights and that they do so from a position of moral strength because they are “here to stay.” This statement is a crucial aspect of LKJ’s political attitude:

From an early age...I realized that black people were in this country to stay and we had to accept that we weren’t going anywhere,...and we had to accept that we’re a part of Britain and that we had to build our own independent institutions here – cultural, political and social institutions – and accept the reality of our situation. (Caesar 69)

Thus, the poem is not exclusively addressed to the Black community. White people will have to learn to read poetry like LKJ’s and they will have to accept it on its own terms. These terms include white peoples’ willingness to learn to read and understand LKJ’s mixture of Jamaican patois and English and to conceive of poetry as rhythmic and as publicly spoken and performed. Furthermore, white readers have to engage with a rhythm in language that they are usually not accustomed to and that denotes certain cultural and social affiliations.

In relation to this demand, LKJ rejects benevolent attempts of white groups to take over the demands of the Black community, a rejection he articulates in “Independent Intavenshan”:

*Make dem gwaan
Now it calm
But a whi who haff really ride di staam*

(repeated)

*Wat a cheek
Dem t’ink we meek
An’wi can’t speak up fi wi self*

(repeated)

*Di SWP can’t set wi free
Di IMG can’t dhu it fi wi
Di Communist Pasty, cho, dem too awty-fawty
An’di labahrites dem naw goh fite fi wi rites*

In terms of language, the importance of style becomes clear in this example. If the white groups that LKJ mentions took over the concerns of the Black movement, they

would formulate them in a language and put them forward in a political style that would be that of said English groups. The concerns would be separated from the ways of life and the concrete experience of the community that is concerned, but that is not heard publicly as addressing the issue.

In presenting the concerns of the black community as their own concerns, such predominantly white political movements would not help but sabotage the concerns of the black movement: In the political realm, the black movement would seem obsolete because the better-known movements would assimilate and champion their causes. In cultural terms, the predominantly white groups that translate the issues of the black movement into their own jargon would make the kind of engagement I have outlined above – using the concrete example of LKJ’s poetry – unnecessary for the general public. Finally, the “adoption” of black issues by groups that represent the system of “white” society can be an easy way to avoid acknowledging that racism is not the problem of black communities (whose problem is the consequences of racism), but rather the problem of white communities. Therefore, predominantly white social movements need to address racism and the problems related to it from a different perspective than the black movement. They need to address it not only by making themselves the “champions” of black issues, but also by addressing the origins and the reasons for the pervasiveness of racism within their own social and political communities. The policies put forward in “Independent Intavenshan” attempt to avoid conflating the approaches the black movement takes in dealing with the consequences of racism with those white societal groups would have to take in dealing with the origins and consequences of racism.

Here language, and in particular Dub Poetry as a fusion of language with a musical style that has certain cultural and spiritual values attached to it, becomes a very practical way to question power relations. LKJ does not ask only for political rights to be written down or put into practice, he also insists on the right of his community to put their demands forward in their own way, practicing a Britishness that is different to what many conceive of as English. The English will have to learn to understand this language, to read this style, and they will have to accept that LKJ’s people as a part of British society have the right to speak about their own issues in their own manner.

LKJ’s poetry thus activates what Peter Hitchcock calls the “Caliban Clause” in the English language:

The decolonizing “I” is one that does not write out English as the standard against which its acculturation must be measured; rather, it questions that which would exclude the forms in which it finds linguistic expression...This is the Caliban clause in English, the weak spot in cultural hegemony where language is appropriated for ends not altogether English as a posited norm. (761)

In connecting style and content, in performing his community’s rights through language and sound, in practicing the equality of his English English/Caribbean English

mixture with British English, and in tying the performance of language to concrete political demands and examples of political struggle, LKJ questions social structures as well as their linguistic expression. Viewed in terms of accents and “accented cultures,” LKJ’s poetics raise the following question: if English “as the standard against which acculturation must be measured” is being questioned so thoroughly, then how can one determine what is an accent and what is not?

It is important to note that this question is not being raised from a location like Bhabha’s “beyond” or “third space.” Let me take a look at Homi Bhabha’s reading of Derek Walcott’s poem “Names” to explain my point. Bhabha writes that nowhere did he find “the concept of the right to signify more proudly evoked than in Derek Walcott’s poem on the colonization of the Caribbean as the possession of space through the power of naming” (231). He then goes on to say that

Walcott’s purpose is not to oppose the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice. He proposes to go beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics. (Bhabha 233)

At this point, Bhabha’s reading of Walcott makes a similar argumentative jump as Naficy’s analysis of Third Cinema and “accented cinema.” Bhabha posits an implicit contradiction. He equates the opposition of “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native ways” to a binary of power and points out in a positive manner that Walcott goes “beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics.” In the same way that Naficy disregards the development of concrete political strategies because armed struggle and class struggle can be polemical, Bhabha does not discuss the opposition of “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice” because, according to him, there is a better option, namely the reorganization of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics.

LKJ’s strategy is a different one. He acknowledges the “opposition of the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice,” addressing the pedagogy of the imperialist noun by emphasizing the native voice much in the tradition of Kamau Brathwaite’s essay “History of the Voice,” and in doing so, attempts “the reorganisation of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics.” None of these different aspects of his poetics can exist without the other, since it is precisely the insight into the ways power relations have affected language and the contestation of these mechanisms that allows the reorganization of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics. In turn, the reorganization of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics is one – but not the only – powerful

instrument to contest what Bhabha calls “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun.” LKJ points out again and again that this pedagogy is as alive as ever, even though it might have shifted the location of its main activity from Jamaica to the British Isles. To address and fight this powerful presence is one of the motivations for LKJ’s double strategy of, on the one hand, engagement with the other culture in his mode of address and in his language, and, on the other, the reaffirmation of his community’s cultural identity. In this logic there is certainly a binary opposition and there is an inside and an outside, notions that Bhabha considers unproductive in *The Location of Culture*. However, these binary oppositions are not created by LKJ. They are created by racism and colonialism and are being enforced by underpayment, police brutality and racial discrimination. To contest these very present forces and their consequences, LKJ cannot voice his questions about the validity of accents from the beyond. In the poetry of LKJ there is no beyond, neither spatially nor temporally. There is the here and now and his objective is to develop a form of engagement that allows different cultures to share it in a respectful manner.

Architectures: The Question of Space

The second problematic I want to focus on concerns the metaphorical negotiation between interstices and spaces in general. “Interstices” is a spatial term. Metaphorically, the term “interstice” suggests a space next to or between other, somehow bigger or more powerful, hegemonically determined spaces that have the power to define the interstice as an interstice. In their use as a metaphor for the accent, as in Naficy’s proposal, interstices become problematic when members of an immigrant culture do not content themselves with living in the interstices, but instead make a counter-claim on the normativity of the other space. The poet whose work I am proposing to use as a “theory” against this metaphor is Lemn Sissay.

In July 2002, Sissay presented a television show called *New Brit*, produced by BBC Choice and the Open University on the occasion of the Queen’s Jubilee. The program concerned itself with the following questions:

Are the Union Jack and God Save the Queen outdated and irrelevant? Do New Brits find value and meaning in the Union Flag and the traditional national anthem? If not, what might a modern national identity look and sound like?

Designers were asked to design an alternative British flag and musicians and writers, among them Sissay, were asked to write an alternative national anthem. Sissay’s alternative anthem was written and performed to DJ Nick Rafferty’s trance version of “God Save the Queen.” Before I turn to a discussion of this text, I will look at two other poems by Sissay. My analysis of the poems “Fair” and “Architecture” will point out several major characteristics of his poetry that are important for his alternative national anthem as well.

The exploration of what stands in the way of contact and communication – racism or a certain enforced denial of one's own wishes, for example – and a questioning of the architecture of society are two highly significant aspects of Sissay's poetry. Many of his poems address the fact that contacts between different people and different cultures are not always pleasant. However, he never stops at the point of complaint. His poems are invitations to his readers or audiences to question their own attitudes and start clearing up the hindrances that make communication difficult or impossible. Sometimes, this invitation takes an aggressive form or tone.

In his poem "Fair," for example, he talks his reader through the history of racism and discrimination:

*I'll cut you a thousand times
While repeating the line
"Yes I know, your blood is red like mine."
I'll rip out your wife's fallopian tubes
Cause there's already too many of you.
I'll make you drink your own piss,
I'll make you listen to this,
One two three thousand times and more
Show you what it's like to know the score.
I'll sell drugs to your children,
Burn down your home,
Make you a stranger to your own,
And what's more
The moment you run on fire,
Through this poem, for the door
Gasp for air and some sense of pride
The same damned experience
Will be waiting for you outside.*

Most white readers experience this poem as extremely aggressive and disturbing. Some try to distance themselves by saying that "he's really over the top" (which he is really not if one reads up on the history of racism). When the poem ends with the lines

*When all this is said and done and said and done
You may accuse me of being a racist
And then we can continue "this discussion"
On a more equal basis.*

one so badly wants to answer back as a white reader – and one has to if one does not want to walk out of this reading experience beaten up, bruised and devoid of all

dignity. Or, for that matter, if one wants to prevent the possible backlash that the last line suggests. But what does one say faced with such a barrage? Once one starts thinking about this question, the poem starts its work.

“Fair,” like most of Sissay’s poetry, is characterized by the presence of a strong speaker. The speaker personalizes the relationship between Sissay and his readers so that the readers feel that they are being addressed. Potentially, this someone can be addressed if the reader chooses to respond. By way of this implied dialogue, Sissay’s printed and performed poetry is an attempt to shake and seduce his audiences into letting down their defenses and emerge as vulnerable people. His readings are a constant back and forth between getting close, recognizing his boundaries, taking a step back and moving close again.

Sissay deploys a similar strategy in his poem “Architecture”:

*Each midnight frost wants to be a snowdrift
Each wave wants to be tidal
Each subtext wants to be a title
Each winter wants to be the big freeze
Each summer the big drought
Each polite disagreement a vicious denial
Each diplomatic smile a one-fingered tribute to tact*

*Don’t you see
How close we are to
Torrents and explosions
Mayhem and madness
Cacophonies of chaos
Crushes and confusion
Torrents and turmoil
And all things out of control.*

*Keep telling yourself:
You’ve got it covered.*

This witty and rhythmically dynamic text captures the reader but does not directly involve her. Even the “Don’t you see” in the refrain preserves a certain distance and could be a rhetorical figure of speech. In the last two lines, Sissay drops this distance and suddenly implies something quite personal, namely that the reader might be kidding herself into a false security. This sudden change of mode of address startles the reader, who finds herself faced with questions like: why is he suddenly addressing me? How did he get from the rhetorical “don’t you see” to my personal issues?

Wasn't this about waves and subtexts? Why does he think I'm kidding myself into having something covered? What have I got covered? And: what am I going to opt for tomorrow, the diplomatic smile or the one-fingered tribute to tact? Both "Architecture" and "Fair" suggest that the architecture of society impedes people from making real contact. Thus, the architecture of society leads to a separation of people and cultures. It makes communicative contact impossible and thus helps to conserve power relations that enable such sentiments as racism.

If Sissay were to remain in an interstice, he would reaffirm precisely the separation and impossibility of communication that society's architecture conditions. However, he refuses to remain locked within the interstices. Instead, he crosses from one space into the other, always bringing his baggage along with him from the other space(s). In doing so, he never conforms to anyone's expectations. "Fair" is not an expression of anger coming from a "third space" where black people like Sissay live; the poem is an invasion of the space that is inhabited by white people and it demands to be heard and understood by them in their space. It belongs there rightly, because the original reasons for the anger it expresses and the suffering it recounts lie in white attitudes, not in black peoples. The poem is based on a realization that all anger is ultimately useless and remains unproductive if it is not responded to by those at whom the speaker is angry. "Fair" is thus not only about articulating a "black" point of view. The poem's speaker is very articulate, suggesting that finding a language to articulate his complaints is no longer his problem. The issue at stake here is "what happens after the claims have been made."

"Architecture" puts its finger into the small wounds of reasonably successful middle class people. It is able to do so because the speaker is familiar with the space his audience inhabits. Knowing the rules, he can question them and point out the cracks in the architecture that keeps this space functioning.

Precisely because both poems emerge unexpectedly in spaces inhabited by people who would conceive of themselves as "other" than Sissay, they solicit a response. If the poems presented themselves as the products of life in the interstice, they would leave the boundaries between the spaces intact. In that case, they would not pose a danger to peoples' attitudes or to the architecture of society, and people might not bother to respond.

Sissay's national anthem envisions a country where such spatial constraints are abolished:

In the name of the islands
In the name of the sea
In the name of the seasons
In the name of history
In the name of women

*In the name of men
In the name of children
God save them all.*

*In the name of the Irish
In the name of the Jewish
In the name of justice
In the name of what truth is
In the name of Mecca
In the name of Jerusalem
In the name of Rome
Save them, save them, save them, save them all.*

*In the name of past wars
In the name of future peace
In the name of immigrants
In the name of release
In the name of the Commonwealth
In the name of the Asians
In the name of Equality
Save them, save them all, save them all, save them, save them all.*

*In the name of the traveller
In the name of the shores
In the name of the defender
In the name of the cause
In the name of the people
In the name of the waves
In the name of the spirit
God save us all, all, all...*

What might at first sight seem an eclectic collection of terms turns out to be a metaphorically charged and highly specific text. Sissay's national anthem first of all changes the protagonists of the national anthem. In "God Save the Queen," the singers remain out of the text. They do not figure and therefore do not matter, only the Queen does. Sissay turns this structure around: He asks after those in whose name the saving is to be done and makes them the central focus of his poem. The Queen is left out altogether, making the poem available as an anthem for a monarchy as well as a republic, because what matters are the people and not the political system. In stanzas two and three, God disappears, too. Instead, the closing lines of these stanzas turn into a plea to whatever entity to save those that need saving.

The protagonists of the poem make for an illustrious combination of ideas, geography and different communities. Justice, truth and equality are values. Major religions, men, women and children figure equally. Standing up to history and the past wars one has caused generates a commitment to future peace. Travelers and immigrants are welcome and so are beliefs (causes), defenders and “the people.” That they are all distributed equally across the different stanzas suggests that they are equally important and that none of them would work without the others. Asking to save the British in the name of the Irish and the Asians adds a certain ironic touch, because the fact that the British need saving is certainly related to the atrocities they committed in the past against, among others, the Irish and the Asians. It also indicates that the British really do need to be forgiven by these people. The architecture of Sissay’s Britain is characterized by openness about the past and by tolerance in the present. There is no sense of pressure on anyone to conform to anything because no one and nothing is any more powerful than any of the others.

The geography of Sissay’s “hybrid” Britain develops out of the sea, the waves and the islands. It has no interstices. Everybody fits onto the same islands: eclectic, specific, different – but all united in the plea to be saved.

Reading and Trespassing

Both poets construct new Britains that make it impossible to determine what an accent is because they do away with the notion of an “original” or “neutral” accent. What remains are different ways of speaking. But as they speak, the critic reads, and reading their poetry raises questions about reading itself. To respond to LKJ’s and Sissay’s poetry as a white European in any meaningful way one has to maintain a balance between interest and intrusion.

To address these difficulties, Timothy Brennan’s article “Cosmo-Theory” is useful. In the following passage, Brennan raises some issues that provide a useful starting point for learning to read with balance:

The “will to truth,” the discursive regime as an arena in which party politics have been displaced by the microlevels of personal interaction, all directs us to the now over-familiar poststructuralist processes of avoiding complicity with the Enlightenment power by remaining vigilant against repressive claims of universality. In this theoretical climate...one avoids complicity by decentering oneself. Such decentering has logically moved the theorist to a form of “biopolitics” and specifically to a politics of the body, which among other things is the ultimate expression of a domain of enclosure that cannot be guilty of trespass on another’s...The only way to escape complicity as such was to oppose all opposition, disagreement or overcoming. The ultimate riposte to power, in other words, was to make oneself powerless – to let power have its way, provided one was innocent of using it. (675–76)

The act of decentering is crucial for reading LKJ's and Sissay's poetry. One cannot say, "Yes, LKJ is right, let's implement strategies to fight racism in the police force" and be done with it. Other questions are at stake: Is LKJ's poetry going to be taught as British poetry in schools? And if it is, is it going to be taught as a tourist trip into Caribbean patois, or is it going to be taught as an integral part of what England is today? If the latter is the case, then one has to ask: What *is* England today? To answer such questions one has to situate oneself. For LKJ and Sissay locate themselves so tightly that as a reader one cannot respond from an empty space. "Independent Intavenshan" and "Fair" leave the reader no choice but to think about where they are coming from and who they are in terms of cultural, social and national affiliations.

Brennan's point about the body as a domain of enclosure that cannot be guilty of trespassing on another's raises the question of how (and if) one can ever touch without trespassing. If white European readers stay within their own domain, they do not trespass but neither do they share their space. Sissay's methodical trespassing points out this difficulty in establishing contact. He trespasses into his readers' false securities and into people's fantasies of what they would like to do but do not. "Fair" shows the other side of trespassing, where it stops being fun. Sissay's national anthem starts to develop a model where there would be no trespassing because space is defined as without delimitation.

Finally, if "the ultimate riposte to power was to make oneself powerless – to let power have its way, provided one was innocent of using it," one ends up feeling beaten after reading "Fair" – and if one leaves it at that, the feeling stays and Sissay will not get the response he is asking for. To make oneself powerless is everything that LKJ writes against. To read and, in reading, to relinquish one's own powers means to essentially ignore his demands because one then puts oneself into a position from which one cannot respond. The only choice left to the white European reader is to hold on to her power, while at the same time questioning where it comes from and what constitutes it. Thus, her reading becomes as accented as any other. And that, these poets reply to Naficy, is exactly what "accented" means.

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