David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution*. London: Pluto Press, 2018. ix + 288 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.00)

Linton Kwesi Johnson has gradually moved from the margins toward the center of the British literary establishment over the last 20 years. His inclusion in the Penguin Modern Classics series in 2002 and the Golden PEN award from English Pen in 2012 demonstrate his rising status within the literary world. Yet, despite the fact that mainstream literary institutions in the United Kingdom have increasingly recognized him as a poet, there has been relatively little published scholarship on his work, especially compared to other contemporary poets with a similar-size readership. One could argue that his status as an activist poet, practitioner, and performer therefore has been higher than his standing as an aesthetic theorist, writer-critic, or philosophical poet. David Austin's *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is the first published monograph about Johnson, and one clear sign, among many recent developments, that this is changing. He shows that the once more dominant historical and materialist focus on Johnson as a "straightforward" political poet is being increasingly replaced by new theoretical, and at times abstract, explorations of his aesthetic-political project.

Austin's book is an important contribution to this recent scholarship and offers a detailed, thought-provoking map of the montage of literary, musical, and philosophical references that underpin Johnson's aesthetic universe. For example, his reading of violence in Johnson's poetry connects references to reggae aesthetics, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire in a seamless and convincing manner. The book is, however, more successful as a personal, explorative, essayistic reflection on Johnson as a vast and eclectic cultural "sphere" than as a scholarly literary analysis of his writing.

Austin's readings will be useful to scholars working on Johnson, and his engagement with the later period of Johnson's poetry is a particularly original and important contribution to existing scholarship. The readings of "Reggae Fi Radni," "More Time," and "Di Good Life"—poems that are rarely discussed in detail—offer contextual information about Johnson's interest in Walter Rodney, and his thought-provoking analysis of Johnson's particular type of socialism and use of elegy invites further discussion. It is, however, difficult to follow Austin's arguments at times. His writing often makes conceptual and historical leaps, and the book has a tendency to present quote after quote, referring to theorist upon theorist, without taking the time to show why they are essential to the discussion, especially in relation to Johnson specifically. The result is that readers often lose sight of Johnson for pages at a time, and many of the discussions, although interesting, are not convincingly grounded in John-

son's poetry or life. The first pages of Chapter 1, for example, seem to attempt to define and discuss the nature of poetry in general by quoting what different poets and philosophers have said about poetry. This discussion would have benefited from a closer tie to Johnson's oeuvre. Very general discussions, like the one about what poetry "is," do not enhance Austin's analysis. From the perspective of literary theory as a field, such a broad and unfocused discussion about poetry makes the scholarly ambition of the book difficult to appreciate. The book does not focus on music, so it seems fair to assume that its aim is to make contributions to literary scholarship on Johnson's work, in addition to shaping the political discourse surrounding the poet.

As the preface explains, this book is not strictly about Linton Kwesi Johnson; it is also about political reflection through poetry and the possibility of radical change that Johnson as a poet, and not least a persona, evokes in Austin. *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is at its most insightful when it fully embraces the associative freedom that the essayistic form allows and acknowledges the book's personal political agenda. Less explored and timely aspects of Johnson's status and influence on the cultural imagination are interestingly revealed through such an approach.

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