

The Aesthetics of Bass

Aesthetics and Postcolonial Politics in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Poetry

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Master's Thesis in Comparative Literature

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between postcolonial politics and aesthetics in Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry. The thesis shows how Johnson's poems are predominantly analysed and discussed in a political context. Less examined, however, are ways Johnson's poetry engages in a discussion about poetic form and aesthetics. Johnson is inspired by reggae music, and he discusses how reggae can inspire a new literary form. In the poems, bass and rhythm can transform people and the society they live in. This thesis examines why studies of Johnson, and of many postcolonial authors in general, tend to extract explicit political messages from the texts and neglect their aesthetic features, and discusses the problematic consequences of this critical praxis. The thesis will discuss Elleke Boehmer's claim that there is an institutionalised opposition between 'the postcolonial' and 'the aesthetic'. I argue that Johnson's poems challenge this opposition, and that they offer the ongoing debate over the role of aesthetics in postcolonial literature some new perspectives.

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1 Introduction

Linton Kwesi Johnson is the poet who gained a place in literary history by writing ‘inglan is a bitch’: a poetic line full of spite and anger stripped of ambiguity and double meaning, a kind of poetry which shares many similarities with simply giving the middle finger. Johnson is widely known as a social commentator, activist, and political poet. He is especially known for voicing disillusionment and anger against racism in Thatcher’s England. However, he is also a poet strongly influenced by the reggae tradition and Jamaican musical subcultures. His work expresses the belief that music and poetry challenge the mechanism of oppression and exclusion:

for di time is nigh
when passion gather high
when di beat jus lash
when di wall mus smash
an di beat will shif
as di culture alltah
when oppression scatah’ (Johnson, 2006, 16).

How can the rhythm and the bass violently smash down walls and alter a culture? What is the role of aesthetics in the poetry of a poet most known for his political provocations and straightforward militant message? How does a writer like Johnson contribute not only to a political discussion, but also to our understanding of poetic form? These are the questions to be examined in this thesis.

Like many other poets who can be labelled postcolonial, Johnson is predominately read with attention to the straightforward political message that is easy to position within an anti-colonial movement. The aesthetic engagement is very often treated as secondary, or at times completely overlooked. By ‘aesthetic’, I imply what relates to the formal and sensuous aspects of art. Purely aesthetic readings of an author like Johnson are seen as speculative or in the worst case as even reactionary in some postcolonial literary circles. This thesis discusses how purely political readings may also be speculative or reactionary, and can ultimately contribute to the limiting of a postcolonial writer’s freedom and the message’s radical potential. I will analyse how the poems are inspired by reggae music, especially the subgenre of dub, and discuss how reggae can inspire a literary form and define the close and dependant relationship between aesthetics and politics in his poetry.

There is an ongoing debate in postcolonial literary circles about whether aesthetics is an unaffordable indulgence for literature that partakes in a postcolonial struggle. I employ this debate as a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Johnson's poems, and I will argue that the poems offer new perspectives that challenge the opposition between 'the postcolonial' and 'the aesthetic'.

1.1 Life and work

When Linton Kwesi Johnson published his first volume of poems in 1974, he had been living in England for 11 years. He was born in 1952 in Chapelton, a small rural town in Jamaica. He moved to London at the age of 11 to join his mother who had immigrated two years earlier. In London, he attended Tulsa Hill Comprehensive and lived with his mother in Brixton, an area with many Jamaican immigrants that later has been vividly depicted in his poetry (Johnson, 2006).

While at school, Johnson joined the Black Panther's youth section (1970) and helped the movement organize poetry workshops with a group of musicians and poets called Rasta Love. The Panthers had a rich library that introduced Johnson to black writers and thinkers. Johnson has often stated this library's importance in opening up a legacy of poetry to him that he did not know existed, and that the English school system did not make available. In addition to the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson discovered the seminal work in African-American literature, W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, which inspired him to write poetry. He wrote his first poems in 1970, at the age of 17 (Markham, 1989, 251–252). Two years later, he entered Goldsmith College, University of London, to study sociology, and in 1974, he joined the collective *Race Today*, a political magazine established in 1969 by the Institute of Race Relations. The magazine was one of the most influential organs addressing black politics in England in the 1970's, and Johnson later became the magazine's arts editor. His first volume of poems, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, came out on the *Race Today* imprint in 1974 (Pryce, 2009). During his time at *Race Today*, he was involved in many political campaigns and committees: The Georg Lindo Action Committee, formed to free a man wrongfully imprisoned, and the campaign against the government's plan to ban the Notting Hill Carnival. He also joined an organization called Creation for Liberation that mobilised artists working with poetry, music, and painting to participate in public performances to raise money for the campaigns, and to foster the work of black British artists (Markham, 1989, 51–252).

Johnson belonged to the youngest generation of poets inspired by The Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) during the early 1970's. He participated in many of the organization's debates and attended many of their events (Wheatle, 2009, 36). This movement informed many of his thoughts about the relationship between art, language, and Caribbean culture.

His second volume *Dread Beat and Blood* came out in 1975, and was released as a record in 1978. The volume was published by Bogle-L'Ouverture, a small press focusing on Caribbean and black writers. In 1977, Johnson became the writer-in-residence for the London borough of Lambeth and was awarded the C. Day Lewis Fellowship. His third volume of poetry *Inglan is a Bitch* came out in 1980, also through Bogle-L'Ouverture. *Tings an' Times: Selected Poems* was released by Bloodaxe in 1991, both as a book and as a record. Johnson has released several albums: *Forces of Victory* (1979), *Bass Culture* (1980), *LKJ in Dub* (1980), *Making History* (1984), *Tings an' Times* (1991), *More Time* (1998), and *Live in Paris* (2004). He has sold over 2 million records as a recording artist (Pryce, 2009). Many of his poems have been accompanied by music or have been performed with a band on stage. Most of his earliest poems were intended for print, and the musical score has accompanied them at a later stage. In later times, he has also written poems intended for albums written in collaboration with reggae producer Dennis Bowell (Markham, 1989). However, he insists, 'People know me as a reggae artist; they don't know me as a poet. But I am a poet, and I began with the word' (DiNovella, 2007).

In 2002, a selection of his poetry called *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* was published in the Penguin Modern Classics series. Johnson was one of only two living poets at the time in the Modern Classics series. This selection was republished as *Selected Poems* in 2006. His poetry has been translated into Italian and German (Johnson, 2006). In December 2012, Johnson was awarded the Golden Pen Award by English Pen for a lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature, which is an important sign of Johnson's ascending position in the English literary establishment.

Johnson has given many interviews, and has remained an active and outspoken poet. He has said a lot about his own work, and explicitly explained his motivation to write poetry. Both shows that Johnson has always been willing to talk about poetry and engage in discussions about poetry with all kinds of people, from the music world, the political world, and the literary world. He has not tried to create mystery or exclusivity around his own life or work. The challenge when faced with this vast material is that he has expressed so many contradictory thoughts throughout the years. Following are two examples: In an interview with the magazine *Sounds* in 1978, he said, 'If I have political relevance, it's only because

I'm involved in politics and what I write about is what I feel. I didn't set out to write political poems because then you become a propagandist not an artist any more' (Goldman, 1978). On the other hand, Johnson is often quoted for the statement 'I saw poetry as a weapon in our struggle for black liberation' (Merriman, 2012, 219). Johnson's many interviews exemplify that the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Johnson's work is complex and ambiguous. The sum of his comments seems to argue that his work is both 'autonomous art' and 'heteronomous art'.¹

In this thesis, I will concentrate my analysis on the relationship between aesthetic experience and politics by making close readings of his poems. He has made many different statements, but what themes and topics are actually present and at work in his poetry? I will contextualize some of my readings with his interviews and essays where I believe that they can help to elaborate on the meaning of terminology and concepts that I will show is independently present in his poetry.

When receiving the Golden Pen in 2012, he emphasised in his acceptance speech that he saw himself as a child of the Caribbean Artist Movement, 'a movement that sought to create an alternative Caribbean aesthetic to the dominant colonizing canon of English literature'.² Johnson has often expressed that there are different definitions of aesthetics at work in different literary traditions, and that he sees himself as part of a counter tradition that has wished to challenge the 'dominant' one. The Caribbean tradition opens up some new ways of thinking about poetry; this fact is often slightly brushed over in favour of emphasizing the Caribbean influence as a political statement with an instrumental view of poetry. In another interview with the journal *Wasafiri*, he has said, 'You have to create your own aesthetic. I created my own poetics and just worked at it' (Wheatle, 2009). He has also commented upon 'the aesthetic he is coming from' (Wroe, 2008). On another occasion, he has said, 'My poetry comes from a different aesthetic than the dominant English one. I'm a product of a hybrid culture, so my aesthetic could never be solely based on the canon of English culture' (Taylor, 2007). Johnson has been dedicated to politics, but he has also

1 When I write 'autonomous art' and 'heteronomous art' throughout the thesis, I use the terms in accordance with how the French theorist Jacques Rancière applies them. He mentions 'art for art's sake' as an example of the former, and 'art in the service of politics' as an example of the latter (Rancière, 2009, 32). Rancière uses the term 'heteronomous art' to contrast 'autonomous art', and to refer to *types of art* that rely on factors external to art. He writes about the 'autonomy' and 'heteronomy' of art, and expresses how they can also be *features* that coexist in a single work of art (Rancière, 2009).

² Acceptance speech available on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz1UlcTt7LM>. The quote is at 1.04 -1.12.

shown, I argue, an interest in the theory of aesthetics and in questions concerning the nature of poetry, its structure, and function.

Johnson has emphasised his place in a hybrid culture. His poetry is not necessarily trying to be the antithesis of English aesthetics. He has tried to distance himself from anti-white racism, and has expressed that the potential battle is not necessarily white against black, but between blacks and the police (Goldman, 1978). Johnson's work is best understood as an attempt to challenge a definition of aesthetics based on exclusion. His project is not anti-aesthetic. It is very clear that Johnson believes in the importance of aesthetics, but not in one that excludes black people's experiences and lives. The formulations 'dominant English' and 'dominant colonizing canon' exemplify this. The fact that the literature is dominant, colonizing, and mainstream is more important than the fact that it is English. It is not just a question of English vs non-English literature, as one might think when one reads various articles about his poetry. In general, it is also a question of opposing the division of poetry into high and low poetry, and of opposing the hierarchies created between autonomous and heteronomous art.

In the poem 'If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet' Johnson humorously distances himself from the styles of T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Chris Okigbo. The diverse group of poets shows that his discussion of poetic form transcends ethnic alliances. He is interested in the hierarchies of different forms of expression, for example of the written and the spoken, low and high poetic styles. He also challenges the hierarchy of different literary themes; riots in Brixton are just as much a poetic object as roses in a field, or modernist experimentation with form. Politics and struggle played an important role in the everyday life of black people in Britain in the seventies. Johnson argued that this life could become the object of poetry. Even though Johnson's poetry has always been political, his politics have been inseparable from a discussion about how we define the aesthetic and how we define poetry, and what we include in these categories.

1.2 Scholarly reception of LKJ's poetry

No monograph about Linton Kwesi Johnson has been published, even though more than ten years have passed since he was included in the Penguin Modern Classics series as only one of two living poets at the time. The other poet was Czesław Miłosz. This absence has raised some question about why a modern classic, according to an influential publishing house, has been met with relatively little research interest from literary scholars internationally. The

University of Oslo library does not own a single copy of *Selected Poems*, or any other volume of Johnson's poetry. One would assume that Johnson's poetry would be included in the collection after he was published in the Penguin Modern Classics series, if not at an earlier stage. No master's thesis or PhD dissertation has been written in Norway about Linton Kwesi Johnson.³ There is so little academic material about Johnson available in Norway in part because he is an English writer, and in part because generally little literary research is dedicated to Caribbean-influenced language or literature in Norway. However, there is also relatively little academic work dedicated to Johnson in England, if one considers his recognition from Penguin Classics.⁴ Even though Johnson in recent years has been accepted by what he calls 'the mainstream of the British literary scene' (Morrison, 2012), there is little academic research being published about him in the UK. Many schools and universities nevertheless have Johnson on their reading lists. There is no obvious explanation for why there are not more works about Johnson published in the UK on a higher academic level. Is Johnson celebrated as a political figure or a voice of a certain time and generation, rather than as someone who has introduced literary scholars to interesting literary themes or theoretical problems? This is not a claim, but rather an interesting speculation. The emphasis on his role as political commentator and cultural figure has been easy to justify by effectively referring to Johnson's background as an activist for the Black Panthers and *Race Today*. However, his poetry does not have such a programmatic or straight forward political message as many critics have argued.

The most cited book about dub poetry, and the first book-length study of the genre, *The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, by Christian Habekost, includes a close reading of one of Johnson's poems. The reading presents an analysis of 'Di Good Life', a poem from *Tings an' Times* (1991) that was later included in *Selected Poems*. Habekost argues that Johnson's poetry became more metaphorical in the nineties in comparison to his earlier poetry, which according to Habekost 'featured a large number of campaign poems and unveiled political messages' (Habekost, 1993, 212). However, 'Di Good Life' is the only poem in *Selected Poems* in which Johnson mentions the word 'socialism' explicitly. Habekost's choice of poem is not especially representative for

³ When I was searching BIBSYS, I was surprised to find only three entries; two were articles in anthologies about Caribbean poetry, and one was in an essay collection of British poetry.

⁴ In the British Library Catalogue, I found six of his own collections, one introduction he has written, 140 audio recordings, 10 articles in journals, and only two chapters in books. The British Library Catalogue does not represent everything that has been written, but it still reveals a low number of publications for a writer in the Modern Classics series. Chapters dedicated to Johnson's work can be found in poetry anthologies and essay collections internationally.

Johnson's oeuvre, and not necessarily even especially representative for Johnson's nineties verse. In the nineties, Johnson also started to write love poems, and he has himself commented that his 'attitude to poetry has broadened over the years' (Morrison, 2012). Habekost presents a negative evaluation of 'Di Good Life', and concludes his reading with some disapproving remarks: "'Di Good Life" shows nothing of the pugnacious militancy which once distinguished LKJ's poetry. His allegorical apology for his own ideology sounds like a nostalgic swan song rather than a radical dub version of the international [sic]' (Habekost, 1993, 217).⁵ This comment shows two assumptions that I challenge in this thesis. Firstly, Johnson's earlier poetry is not distinguished only because of its 'pugnacious' militancy. Secondly, Johnson's poetry should not be evaluated in terms of aspiring towards being 'a radical dub version of 'The Internationale'. Habekost presents Johnson as a poet who has evolved from writing radical political poetry to writing outdated political poetry. I believe that Habekost presents a reductive reading of Johnson, with a one-dimensional focus on Johnson's poetry as a more or less efficient political project. Even though he claims that Johnson's language has become more metaphorical, his reading concludes that Johnson's nineties poetry represents a one-dimensional and preachy worldview. Habekost's reading reveals its own bias when it ends with the following footnote:

Interestingly, however, in another poem 'Di Anfinish Revaluashan' (also on the LP Tings An' Times) the poet-persona dissociates from any ideological viewpoint, affirming that 'freedom is nat noh ideology' [freedom is no ideology] but 'a human necessity' (Habekost, 1993, 217).

One could object that Habekost just makes a claim about one poem and not a general remark about Johnson's oeuvre. However, because the reading of 'Di Good Life' is the only reading included in the book, it gives a very un-nuanced impression of politics in Johnson's poetry. The footnote implies that Johnson's politics is more complex, and points at his ambivalence towards political ideology. Nevertheless, why is this ambivalence and variation in Johnson's poetry reduced to a footnote? This ambivalence is interesting in itself. Habekost's footnote is symptomatic of a general tendency I have observed in many articles written about Johnson. The ambiguity and double meaning in his poetry is reduced in favour of emphasising the explicit revolutionary political message of his work. When it is not overlooked, it is treated as additional information, an extra dimension, and not something crucial to our understanding of his poetry.

⁵ 'Di Good Life' is dedicated to the memory of C.L.R James and John Holness, two important Caribbean Marxists thinkers. Johnson knew C.L.R James personally, so the line 'Sowshalism / is a wild old shephard' might be an elegy about the death of his elderly idealist friend, and not necessarily an apology for his own ideology.

Shalini Puri, author of *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004), argues that Caribbean literary criticism tends to focus on the revolutionary political messages, and often overlook messages that are not directly subversive. Puri presents a very interesting reading of Johnson's poetry in the article 'Beyond Resistance: Note Towards a New Caribbean Cultural Studies' (2003). She argues that Caribbean cultural studies have been drawn to voices of resistance and anger: 'What I am arguing is that celebratory critical accounts of dub poetry tend to overstate the security of the political knowledge of the poem's speaker and underread the faltering process of its emergence' (Puri, 2003, 37). The article argues that Johnson and the other most influential dub poet, Mikey Smith, are among the dub poets who the critical reception has made more monotonous than they are by having a desire to 'uncover or recover a revolutionary or militant popular culture' (Puri, 2003, 33). She further writes, 'The critical strategy that makes revolutionary consciousness a precondition for gaining entry into the canon silences significant aspects of Smith's and Johnson's poetry, not least the long octave that spans resignation and refusal' (Puri, 2003, 37). Puri's criticism can be applied to Habekost's reading. Habekost's reading is reductive precisely because it romanticizes the revolutionary and 'street credible' aspect of Johnson's writing, treating the 'swan song' as extrinsic to dub poetry. Habekost expresses a view whereby Johnson's poetry is distinguished because it is militant, so that any aspect that is not clearly *anti*, or does not express resistance towards a defined target, is perceived as less interesting, be it nostalgia, defeat, joy, or submission. However, reggae lyricism spans from dance instruction pieces to election campaign songs. Reggae deejays have covered a wide range of subjects, and revolutionary political lyrics are only one aspect of this diverse lyrical material. Social commentary has played an important role, but reggae lyricism has depicted all aspects of everyday life, and the varied experiences of ordinary people. Many reggae lyrics are about boy-girl relationships, like any other pop music. As Johnson has put it, there is just as much 'girl I love you', 'boy you treat me bad' and this kind 'a thing. A lot of it is like that' (Lides, 1999). Why should Johnson's inspiration from reggae then be understood in terms of the revolutionary version of 'The Internationale', and as incompatible with the 'swan song'? I disagree with this understanding of dub poetry because it underestimates the historical diversity of reggae lyricism. Habekost exemplifies that in relation to Johnson, reggae music has mostly been understood as a radical political concept, rather than as an important source of aesthetic experiences and enjoyment.

Studies about Johnson have often emphasised his protest against racism in Britain, his political resistance, and his being a voice that has represented the black experience in Britain. The short entries about Johnson in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century*

Poetry in English (Hamilton, 1996) and *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (Corcoran, 2007) both share this political emphasis. In comparison to political readings, there have been few examinations of the role of aesthetic experience in Johnson's poetry, considering how many of his poems portray musical experience. However, some articles in recent years have discussed his particular contribution to defining aesthetic principles. The article 'Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry and the Political Aesthetics of Carnival in Britain' (Dawson, 2006), discusses Johnson's involvement in the carnival movement. Another article 'Goon poets of the black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson's imagined canon' (McGill, 2003) examines Johnson's playful critique of the canon and of the literary establishment. The unpublished PhD thesis 'The demands of a new idiom: Music, language and participation in the work of Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite and Linton Kwesi Johnson' (Kohli, 2005), analyses the relationship between music and participation in his work. These works are all from recent years, and there might be reason to think that interest in Johnson's discussion of aesthetics is increasing: partly because he is gaining recognition as a poetic innovator by the literary establishment, but possibly also because solely looking at racial politics has lost some of its critical edge amongst a younger generation that are less intrigued by the idea of a black poet than they were in the mid-seventies. Many of the battles the black community faced that Johnson portrayed have been won; maybe contemporary readers feel that they can take interest in other aspects of the poems now that these issues feel less urgent. The growing interest in rap and hip hop within cultural studies might also give Johnson's depiction of urban street culture a new frame of reference in future that will bring more attention to how his insistence on the poetic qualities of the deejay has wider implications for the state of contemporary poetry, and not just for the state of contemporary politics.

One of the most recent published articles about Linton Kwesi Johnson is in *Lines of Resistance: Essays on British Poetry from Thomas Hardy to Linton Kwesi Johnson* (Merriman, 2012). Assistant professor of English at San Francisco State University, Emily Taylor Merriman, discusses the relationship between political resistance and musical enjoyment in the poems. Merriman writes that there is an intrinsic tension between the two:

The music (usually some form of reggae) that often accompanies Johnson's verse in performance tends to reinforce this hopeful, even joyous vision, but such reinforcement can be problematic, as the relaxed enjoyment of the music easily turn into an end in itself. If and when that happens, the effect is to reduce the quality of mindful resistance that generated the pleasure-giving form in the first place, even while it engenders the very enjoyment which ranks high in Johnson's scale of values. The creatively instigated resistance can be swallowed up in the relatively passive reception of the artistic product (Merriman, 2012, 221).

Merriman acknowledges that musical pleasure and enjoyment have an important place in Johnson's poetry. However, she argues that musical enjoyment is a factor that can potentially interfere with the resistance and political messages. According to her analysis, enjoyment can be empowering, but also a form of escapism. Merriman initially attributes political resistance to the political voice and lyric, and not to the musical beat or groove. She writes that music 'accompanies' the verse in performance. I argue that musicality, especially bass driven dub, is present in the printed poems and is a crucial part of the verse even when it is not performed. In my reading, I also argue that Johnson's use of language and symbolism portrays reggae music and poetry, especially the heavy bass and rhythm *itself*, as a powerful and violent political force that challenges the opposition between pleasure and resistance. Merriman's reading reflects upon the composite nature of Johnson's poetry and acknowledges that 'the pleasurable elements of Johnson's art resist the joylessness that plagues people of all races and classes in unjust societies' (Merriman, 2012, 229). Merriman does try to look beyond dub poetry as angry resistance. However, by fearing that musical enjoyment and pleasure will reduce the 'mindful resistance', she exemplifies that the anxiety and fear that aesthetic aspects of art will reduce the revolutionary message are firmly rooted in much criticism of dub poetry.

Puri argues that the consequence of the critic's wish to promote the text's revolutionary stance is that other, less angry, or obviously subversive aspects of the texts are under-read. Puri addresses only the critical reception of dub poetry. However, the article 'A postcolonial aesthetic: repeating upon the present' (2010), by Elleke Boehmer, shows that Puri's criticism can be transferred to a larger metacritical framework, namely the postcolonial literary field in general. Elleke Boehmer, professor of world literature in English at Oxford, argues that many postcolonial critics have avoided the aesthetic aspect of postcolonial literature, because it has been seen as taking attention away from the political struggle and the anti-colonial resistance, which define the categorization and canonization of these literatures. Boehmer argues that there has been an institutionalized opposition between 'the postcolonial' and 'the aesthetic'. The current debate about 'the postcolonial vs the aesthetic' that Boehmer presents will function as the theoretical framework for my analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and postcolonial politics in Johnson's poetry.

I propose that the opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic is a consequence of how the majority of postcolonial critics have chosen to define the relationship between aesthetics and literature. The opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic is created by an underlying view of art: the assumption that 'autonomous art' has more aesthetic

qualities than ‘heteronomous art’, and that ‘aesthetics’ and ‘struggle’ are dichotomies. Johnson’s poetry challenges these two ideas, and shows how the opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic disappears when one re-evaluates these two ideas.

I will refer to the cultural historian Larry Shiner and the French theorist Jacques Rancière because they offer a conceptual framework for discussing how the opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic are challenged in Johnson’s poems. They offer perspectives that are lacking in the current debate. Their perspectives reveal that ‘the postcolonial vs the aesthetic’ is the result of a critical practice, not of an essential dichotomy.

I refer to Rancière’s theory of aesthetics for three reasons: he defines how the aesthetic can be political, and he explains why there is no hierarchy of ‘autonomous’ and ‘heteronomous’ art in the ‘aesthetic regime of art’. He also challenges the idea of a proletariat that does not have the time or capacity to consume or partake in art. I refer to Shiner’s *The Invention of Art* (2001) for two reasons: Shiner explains how the idea that autonomy is an aesthetic prerequisite for art became dominant in the fine art institution, and why this idea is less dominant today. In this way, Shiner shows that postcolonial literature finds itself in the same situation as the majority of art today, but that the critical discussion surrounding postcolonial literature is more acute and polarised. Shiner also makes it possible to see the poems’ exploration of the relationship between art and life in relation to a contemporary pragmatic approach, instead of in relation to the historical avant-gardes’ attack on the art institution.

Johnson’s poetry unites the postcolonial with the aesthetic, despite how they are often treated as dichotomies. I will use the theoretical framework to discuss how the poems challenge this dichotomy, and make a unity possible.

1.3 Scope and structure of the thesis

To keep my focus on the relationship between aesthetics and postcolonial politics, I concentrate my analysis on the poems from the seventies, which mainly include poems first printed in *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975).⁶ This period in his career most clearly combines a vital radical awareness of the black experience in England with the attempt to introduce a new literary style called ‘dub poetry’, a term Johnson coined to describe how reggae, as jazz had done before, inspired a new form of poetry. This exploration continues throughout his

⁶ *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) includes a play and only one poem, which is also printed in *Dread Beat and Blood*.

career, but the relationship between aesthetics and politics is most vital in the period in which he establishes his voice on both the poetic and the political scenes. The seventies was a strongly politicised period in England, filled with racial tension. This highly political period makes these poems a fruitful site to discuss the contemporary postcolonial debate about the role of aesthetics in postcolonial literature that is associated with political struggles. The combination of the radical political climate and the rise of reggae as international popular culture make the relationship between aesthetics and politics inevitable in the poems from this period.

The seventies is also the period in which he produces the most poetry intended for literary publication, which makes these poems more suitable for close readings than the later poems that were intended for albums. I will also look at some poems from the eighties and nineties to contextualise my readings and to add a different perspective to the seventies poems. Johnson's later poems show how the seventies poems partake in a discussion about poetic form that evolves throughout his career and that consists of different stages in the process of formulating a reggae-inspired poetics.

I analyse only his printed and published poems. I will not analyse any musical recordings or live footage *directly*, but will rather look at the literary representation of music, and at how music informs his literary form and content in print. Johnson has been interested in challenging the hierarchy between the oral and the written, and my choice of material should not be understood as an attempt to retain this hierarchy. Hopefully, there will be readings of Johnson's artistic practice that are more fully multimedia in nature, but I believe that detailed analysis of the separate components of his oeuvre is necessary before this can be done with the precision and rigour the material deserves. Music will therefore be approached as an important *context*, inspiration, and symbolic frame of reference. In addition, I choose to concentrate my analysis on the printed material because I wish to exemplify why the material is not just interesting as a cultural phenomenon, but why it is particularly interesting for literary critics and literary theory. I want to bring more attention to Johnson's written poems, because there have been few close readings and detailed examinations of them, and too many general critical arguments based on his persona and political activity. The written material is surprisingly complex and ambiguous when compared to his public image, and I therefore believe that close readings can contrast the one-dimensional political focus on his work.

All cited poems will refer to *Selected Poems* (2006). I have selected poems that originally appeared in different volumes and albums. *Dread Beat and Blood* includes 27 poems, and four sections of which I have selected seven poems for close reading: 'Five

Nights of Bleeding’, ‘Time Come’, and ‘Street 66’ from the first section ‘Doun De Road’. In addition, ‘Dread Beat an Blood’, ‘Bass Culture’, and ‘Reggae Sounds’ from the third section ‘Bass Culture’. ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ was also printed in *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974).⁷ I will also give readings of a selection of later poems that first appeared on albums, but that have been printed in *Selected Poems*: ‘Want fi Goh Rave’ from *Forces of Victory* (1979), ‘New Craas Massakah’ from *Making History* (1984), ‘More Time’ and ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’ from *More Time* (1998). These poems have been selected because they are the poems that most dynamically explore the dialogue between aesthetics and political struggle. The selection is best suited to show that this relationship follows certain recurring themes and motifs, but also to show how Johnson explores this relationship from slightly different angles and perspectives.

The Penguin *Selected Poems* edition from 2006 is divided into three chapters: ‘Seventies Verse’, ‘Eighties Verse’, and ‘Nineties Verse’. Johnson has also used these three categories when performing his poetry on stage. This is a useful way of categorizing different periods in Johnson’s work because his poetry has always reflected the current historical situation and events. As a source for literary research, the *Selected Poems* edition has many weaknesses. The edition presents no editor, even though it includes footnotes that do not appear in the first editions. The footnotes explain Jamaican terms and explain the historic references and context, but it is not clear who has written them. Neither does the edition give any information about when nor in what volumes the poems were originally published. Thus, the edition does not offer the minimum of the required information for further research, and does not give any evidence of Johnson as a field of literary study. I will still, for practical reasons, use this edition – it is the one currently in print and the edition most read today. However, I will comment on differences between *Selected Poems* and the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*, wherever I believe that the changes are significant.⁸ It is important to note that Johnson spells the same words differently in different poems because he uses non-standardized Jamaican Creole. It might therefore be necessary to think of the differences between editions as variants within a continuum, rather than as copies of an original.

⁷ ‘Time Come’ and ‘Dread Beat an Blood’ were published in the journal ‘Savacou’ (9/15) before they were published in the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*.

⁸ I will not compare the poems that first appeared on albums with the album versions, because I will not analyse music directly. The albums I have found do not include printed lyrics, though they might exist in other issues and releases. However, I do not consider the various album versions a part of this study’s scope.

A reader familiar with Johnson's oeuvre will maybe notice that this thesis does not present a full reading of 'Inglan is a Bitch', Johnson's most famous poem from the 1980 collection of the same name. The reason for this is not only because I concentrate my analysis on the seventies poems, but because I have wanted to bring attention to the aspects of Johnson's poetry that challenge his rather one-dimensional political public image, which might be somewhat caused by the disproportionate amount of attention given to his most tabloid-friendly phrase. It is possible to argue that I have excluded Johnson's most explicit political poems in the selection I have made. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that I have excluded his least political side, since I have not included any of his love poems either. I believe that if there is a lack in this thesis, it is not the political, but rather the romantic Johnson. The love poems are regrettably neglected in scholarly studies; those poems and the neglecting of them would be an interesting subject for further research. The neglected love poems can be understood as another example of how the critics' wish to uncover a revolutionary message has silenced other aspects of Johnson's work.

My presentation of the scholarly reception of Linton Kwesi Johnson postulates that politics has overshadowed aesthetics in most readings of his poems. Before I present my own close readings, I will give a more detailed presentation of the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 will discuss the reception of Johnson's poem in the light of Elleke Boehmer's article 'A postcolonial aesthetic: repeating upon the present', which describes the institutionalised opposition between aesthetics and politics in postcolonial literary studies. I will explain how the cultural historian Larry Shiner and the philosopher Jacques Rancière offer perspectives that challenge the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous art, aesthetic art and art in the service of politics.

The next four chapters present close readings of the selection of poems. The poems will not be presented in accordance with a chronological order, but in accordance with the thematic focus of my analysis. Chapter 3 will analyse the poems with regard to the characteristics of the genre dub poetry. In Chapter 4, I will examine how the bass line inspires Johnson's poetry and poetics. As many of Johnson's poems depict musical events, Chapter 5 examines the descriptions and functions of 'the sound system', a Jamaican mobile discotheque. In Chapter 6, I focus on the way music is described as integrated in everyday activity and movement. In the last chapters of the thesis, I will discuss the findings of my close readings and tie them to the theoretical problems outlined in Chapter 2. Chapter 7 discusses how Johnson's poetry challenges the opposition between 'the aesthetic' and 'the postcolonial'. In Chapter 8, I will present my concluding remarks.

2 Theoretical framework: the postcolonial vs the aesthetic

There is more than one way to define postcolonial literature, and postcolonial studies constantly stresses that it is an ambiguous and contested term. I will explain two predominant definitions to illustrate why Linton Kwesi Johnson is defined as a postcolonial writer, and why the political focus on his literature is coloured by this definition.

Two main directions are usually presented in introductions or guides to postcolonial literature. 'Postcolonial literature' can be a chronological or periodising term that refers to literature written in the period after colonialism, and in the wake of rebuilding postcolonial nation states and cultures. In recent times, the term has referred less to a historical category, and more to an ideological concept. Decolonization is not necessarily perceived as a historical event, but rather as a kind of intellectual activity or criticism towards Eurocentrism and the 'binary structures of opposition', which justify colonialism (Lazarus, 2004, 4). However, the chronological and ideological definitions are often intertwined in praxis, because postcolonial literature mostly refers to writing by authors from, or with origins from, former colonies outside of Europe or the 'West', who in some way ideologically respond to the legacy of colonialism.

Linton Kwesi Johnson's work fits into both the chronological and the ideological definitions. His poetry depicts the life of Jamaican immigrants in London in the years after independence, and exemplifies the revived interest in national languages and in Caribbean cultural heritage in the process of decolonization. His writing also expresses a strong ideological resistance to racism, and to mentalities founded on the separation of high and low forms of being. However, it is important to remember that Johnson is a distinctively English phenomenon. The language he uses, and the reality he describes, is closer to the urban street life of London than to the Jamaican folk tradition, even though the two are in dialogue. Johnson's poems are set in Brixton, not in Jamaica. This difference is very important. It is exactly this conversation between native origin and a hybrid diaspora culture in the urban metropole that makes his poetry distinctly postcolonial. I will explain Jamaican cultural phenomena that are referenced in his writing, but it is important to remember that these are appropriated in a specifically English context. The sound system, for example, originated in Jamaica, but evolved into a specific subculture in England that had much wider cultural

implications than merely being a means of nationalist unification. The relationship between Jamaican national culture and a distinctly English popular culture is in a complex dialogue in these poems.

The different definitions of postcolonial literature that I have discussed above have in common that they define postcolonial literature as literature that exists in relation to a certain historical context, specifically to colonialism and its legacy. If one defines postcolonial literature as literature from the time after colonial independence or as a theoretical framework for the critique of Eurocentrism, one implicitly defines postcolonial literature by its relation to history and to the power structures that have dominated history. If the term ‘postcolonial’ designates a chronological movement, the historical aspect becomes obvious. The theoretical framework is also defined by history, though in a less obvious way. The intellectual activity and theoretical framework of postcolonial studies are dominated by being an assessment of the interaction between race, class, and gender (More-Gilbert, Stanton, and Malay, 1997, 2). These are all concepts that are shaped by real-world situations, regimes of oppression and racism throughout history. Postcolonial literature, as Elleke Boehmer remarks, ‘entails a definition drawn not from the *work* but from the *world*; that it first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form’ (Boehmer, 2010, 176; italics in original). The relationship between postcolonial literature and a particular sociocultural context becomes evident already in the above definitions of the term ‘postcolonial’. The reason why I write ‘particular sociocultural context’ is because it is not just any neutral understanding of the colonial context and history, it is defined by a particular way of reading and *resisting* colonial thought. The postcolonial scholar Robert J.C. Young argues that postcolonial literature is a critical tradition that functions as an extension of anti-colonial movements in former colonies. He argues that the strong association between poststructuralism and postcolonial studies lies in deconstructing and analysing some of the basic assumptions and ideas of Western logic. According to Young, postcolonialism, and post structuralism have a similar way of contributing to an intellectual ‘anti-western strategy’ (Gikandi, 2004, 99). The anti-colonial aspect of postcolonial theory needs to be examined closer to understand why postcolonial literature is read as political rather than aesthetic.

2.1.1 Aesthetics as distraction and indulgence

The anti-colonial struggle is a noble political agenda, but it is nonetheless a political agenda. There are several ways this agenda can affect the expected role of the postcolonial writer

and how critics approach postcolonial literature. John Marx makes an interesting remark about how postcolonial writers are made into cultural representatives and what he describes as ‘anticolonial activists’. Marx writes in ‘Postcolonial literature and the western literary canon’: ‘The contention that non-Western writing and art are collective and cultural rather than individual and personal derives as much from modernist primitivism as from *négritude* and afro centrism’ (Marx, 2004, 86–87). There is nothing wrong with being an anti-colonial activist. However, once literary critics treat postcolonial writers predominantly as political activists, it will imply a view of what literature is and what literature does. If postcolonial literature is seen purely as a means for reaching a pre-defined political goal, the literature is treated as instrumental rather than autonomous. Can the enormous diversity in postcolonial experiences and writing be reduced to *one* program or definition of anti-colonial struggle in this way? Most importantly, does a political motivation have to exclude the importance of aesthetics?

Elleke Boehmer addresses why there has been a general avoidance of the aesthetic in postcolonial criticism. She uses the following definition of aesthetic:

Throughout, I take the term ‘aesthetic’ broadly speaking as referring to a concern with the form and structure of a work of art over its raw content, or with form as a critical part of its content. The phrase ‘postcolonial aesthetic’ therefore implies the privileging, for example, of the work’s generic and connotative language. Above all, it implies a concern not to read that work only with orientation to other frames of reference, historical, social, or political, but on its own terms, as insisting on its own particular modes of attention (Boehmer, 2010, 171).

I will apply two slightly different uses of the word ‘aesthetics’ in my thesis: one that refers to literary form and one that refers to aesthetic experience in the meaning of ‘sensual perception’ in general. The first is similar to Boehmer’s, and refers the formal aspects of literature. For example, when I write ‘a reggae literary aesthetic’, it can be rephrased to ‘the reggae literary form’. I use this formulation only when I refer to quotes, articles, discussions, or books that already use this meaning of the word, like in the case of Boehmer’s discussion of ‘the postcolonial vs the aesthetic’, or Kwame Dawes’ book *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing*. However, the formulation ‘aesthetic experience’ is more frequent in my own arguments, and refers to Alexander Baumgarten’s philosophical definition of aesthetics as ‘sensual perception’ (Hammermeister, 2002, 8), which includes, but is not limited to art (Hammermeister, 2002, 7).

One of the unique characteristics of Johnson’s poetry is that it thematises aesthetic experience, and makes it the motif of the poems. Many of my readings will therefore be thematic readings. The main focus will be on aesthetic experience as literary *content*, rather

than on my individual aesthetic experience when reading the poems. However, these two levels are intertwined and constantly present. I will bring attention to how the aesthetic experience of bass is at work on both levels, even though I will often explicitly discuss only the thematic level throughout the thesis.

Deepika Bahri, associate professor at Emory University, argues that the phenomenon of pre-emptive politicisation of literature is common in many current practices. This is indeed almost invariably true for practical postcolonial criticism. Bahri describes a strangely polarised situation: ‘The care of the aesthetic in readings of postcolonial literature has for too long been the love that dare not speak its name’ (Bahri, 2003, 13). Elleke Boehmer suggests that postcolonial critics have hesitated to approach the purely aesthetic because it can interfere with the anti-colonial politics that dominates the postcolonial community:

Insofar as the postcolonial can be taken to signify a political commitment to some form of struggle and as allied to the traditions of anticolonial resistance (Young 2001), a simultaneous commitment to an aesthetic is understandably viewed in some postcolonial circles as a distraction, an unaffordable indulgence (Boehmer, 2010, 172).

Firstly, the quote displays an either-or logic on behalf of some postcolonial scholars. A ‘simultaneous’ commitment to aesthetics and politics is considered a distraction from the politics; hence, they are treated as mutually exclusive. Secondly, aesthetics is described as something that is not viewed as a part of the ‘the struggle’, taking for granted that aesthetics cannot have an anti-colonial function. Boehmer’s article is descriptive in the sense that she tries to map the dominant position on aesthetics in the field. The article also has a normative aspect because she does argue that critics should pay more attention to aesthetics. However, she also expresses a lot of anxiety about her position and seems to fear that this move is suspect or illegitimate. This anxiety becomes evident when she writes that a simultaneous commitment to an aesthetic is ‘understandably’ viewed as indulgence.⁹ I think Boehmer’s article is interesting precisely because it shows how strong the anxiety about aesthetics is, and how integrated it is in postcolonial discourse even amongst those who are suggesting new practices. Even though Boehmer might be more positive towards aesthetics than some other postcolonial critics are, I argue that her arguments and rhetoric express many of the same dichotomies. This similarity becomes evident in her definition of what makes literature aesthetic or non-aesthetic, and when she creates a dichotomy between autonomous art and

⁹ Four pages into the article, Boehmer writes: ‘Depending on which side of the fence one stands, the coupling of *postcolonial* with *aesthetic* by now begins to appear either deeply abstruse, or deeply suspect, or both’ (Boehmer, 2010, 174; italics in original).

what can be defined as heteronomous art. Boehmer also wishes to define what ‘a postcolonial aesthetic’ (Boehmer, 2010, 172; emphasis mine) might entail by comparing texts and defining what formal qualities they may have in common, but is this the way to retain the diversity and complexity of vast amounts of literature, of almost every continent and style? This thesis focuses on the unique qualities of individual texts that are made more one-dimensional and uniform than they are by being forced into a predefined and programmatic definition of postcolonial politics and aesthetics. I will therefore not try to define ‘a’ postcolonial aesthetic. Boehmer’s article shows that there are changes taking place and a will to address the topic, but I think it also reveals why there is still a long way to go before the postcolonial field fully embraces the potential and applicability of developments in contemporary aesthetic theory.

The institutionalized opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic that Boehmer maps is exemplified in the article about ‘Caribbean Aesthetics’ in the reference work *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*:

Defining concepts such as “aesthetics,” “aesthetic expression,” “artist,” and “work of art” within the socioeconomic contexts of the Caribbean is extremely problematic for several reasons. First, owing to the fact that efforts to distinguish the area from the rest of the world have been quite recent, these concepts, which traditionally suggest universality consistent with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, are infrequent in Caribbean discourse. Caribbean discourse, not organized until well into the twentieth century, tends to refer more to politically and socially committed terms, such as “culture,” “cultural expression,” “cultural identity,” “socio-cultural system,” and, more recently, even “Caribbeanness,” a concept with nationalistic aspirations that claims for the area a cultural identity and a socioeconomic matrix – the slave plantation – that are more or less shared (Kelly, 1998, 341).

Caribbean countries are very different, but most of them are postcolonial societies. The entry states that Caribbean discourse tends to refer more to social and political terms and calls the concept of aesthetics ‘extremely problematic’, in the Caribbean. ‘Extremely’ is a strong word, and its use shows that this problem or anxiety about the aesthetic is considered encyclopaedic and neutral information. This entry also shows that Boehmer’s mapping of the scepticism towards ‘the aesthetic’ in postcolonial literary studies is an analysis of a rather institutionalized consensus, visible in many articles, discussions, and classrooms.

2.1.2 Postcolonial critique of the universal

I will try to suggest some more clues to why the ideal of autonomous literature historically has been opposed to postcolonial theory. This will serve as a necessary fundament for my later arguments about the importance of aesthetic experience in Johnson’s poems. Elleke Boehmer argues that the polarity between the postcolonial and the aesthetic, or what she

bluntly describes as ‘the aesthetic *versus* the postcolonial’ (Boehmer, 2010, 171; emphasis in original), can be traced back to the great impact Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790) has had on aesthetic theory. According to Boehmer, Kant’s aesthetics signifies the most problematic aspect of the aesthetic for postcolonial theory, which is ‘a universality of the judgement of taste’ (Boehmer, 2010, 172). Boehmer describes this universalising aspect of aesthetics: ‘In other words, to experience a subjective pleasure in the beautiful implies at the same time a participation in a universal capacity to experience and then to talk and adjudge of this feeling in a way that transcends cultural-political co-ordinates and determinations’, (Boehmer, 2010, 172). It is the idea of *a priori* aesthetics and universal validity that is difficult to align with the postcolonial. The idea of the universal easily comes into conflict with postcolonial theories’ interest in difference and the impact of post-structuralism. In the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Denis Dutton argues that universal aesthetics has been considered essentialist, and therefore perceived to have elements in common with racist varieties of biological determinism. In addition: ‘The rejection of aesthetic universalism, and with it the acceptance of culture as the ultimate determinant of aesthetic value, has also been seen by relativists as a way to oppose the notion of European superiority in cultural value’ (Dutton, 2003, 212). Relativism has probably been a way for postcolonial scholars to reject the idea of European superiority, and to defend the value of non-European art.

Another aspect that has likely enhanced the postcolonial scepticism towards Kantian aesthetics is the way Kant, like many other philosophers in the eighteenth century, described natives and women. Larry Shiner emphasises these prejudices, and discusses why it is problematic that Kant did not include women and Africans into the group of people he thought to be capable of making disinterested aesthetic judgments. In this context, Shiner refers to an utterance in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*: ‘The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling (Kant in Shiner, 2001, 139).¹⁰ This is a racist conception of other peoples that postcolonial theory has worked hard to deconstruct, and it is obvious why there is a general scepticism towards the legacy of that period in of European thought.

2.1.3 The ‘purely’ aesthetic vs struggle

In *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner examines the rise of aesthetic consciousness in the eighteenth century, and the evolution from the notion of taste to the idea of aesthetics as a

¹⁰ Shiner takes the quote from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, 1960, University of California Press, Berkley, p. 110.

distinctive philosophic discipline. Shiner writes, ‘In the old system of art, taste was usually tied to an “interest” or stake in the purpose of works of art, whether moral, practical or recreational; in the new system of fine arts, the response believed most appropriate became one of disinterested contemplation’ (Shiner, 2001, 144). Kant’s writing played an important role in formulating the autonomy of aesthetic experience and the concept of aesthetics as disinterested contemplation. For Kant, aesthetic judgement is a harmonious free play of our imagination and our understanding (Kant, 1951, 52). This most generally means that aesthetic experience is considered independent from morality, science, and utility. Shiner argues that only those who have attained a certain comfort in life can possess a truly disinterested attitude, and he quotes Kant, who proclaims, ‘Only when their need is satisfied can we tell who ... has taste and who does not’ (Kant in Shiner, 2001, 150).¹¹ This is one concept that comes into conflict with postcolonial thought, and with Robert J.C. Young’s argument that postcolonial studies is a part of a larger anti-colonial movement, one which moves drastically away from the idea of art or literature as independent from utility and morality. However, it is necessary to consider how the postcolonial interpretive practice also seems to continue some aspects of Kantian aesthetics.

As I have mentioned above, according to Boehmer, postcolonial critics have viewed aesthetic pleasure/experience as an indulgence or distraction because postcolonial literature takes part in a struggle. Kant asserted the importance of needs being satisfied before the question of taste could be decided, and his statement supports the opposition between struggle and aesthetic judgment. Boehmer’s analysis and Kant’s comments show how the idea of an opposition between the postcolonial and aesthetic is implemented from two directions simultaneously. From the perspective of classic aesthetics and the legacy from Kant, postcolonial literature excludes itself from the field of aesthetics because it is engaged in political struggle and in local concerns, and is therefore not autonomous or universal. From a postcolonial perspective, postcolonial literature is not concerned with aesthetics, because it is marked by the political situation in the way it is both written and experienced. Strangely, postcolonial scholars thus seem to agree with Kantian aestheticians that autonomy is an aesthetic prerequisite for literature. Why do postcolonial scholars accept this privileging of ‘autonomous’ literature in relation to aesthetics, instead of challenging that way of thinking? Without drawing too many conclusions from this situation, I want to suggest a problematic consequence of this acceptance: that postcolonial scepticism towards aesthetics paradoxically

¹¹ Shiner takes the quote from *Critique of Judgment*, 1987, Hackett, Indianapolis, p. 52.

defends the exclusion of certain people from the realm of aesthetic experience of art. Boehmer argues that the idea of universalism is the element of classic aesthetics that is most difficult to reconcile with the postcolonial. In my opinion, there are three main approaches to this problem from the viewpoint of postcolonial aesthetics: either to reject the universalist pretension and argue for absolute relativism, or to treat the universal as a Western political claim towards which the postcolonial perspective is an opposition. Alternatively, one can take the notion of the universal at face value and make it include postcolonial literature. The last option will require an expanded definition of aesthetics, which I believe is the only option that can truly challenge the opposition between the postcolonial and the aesthetic. Would it not be better to extend the definition of aesthetics than to continue excluding certain people from those capable of aesthetic judgment? I believe that this exclusion unfortunately retains some of the eighteenth century racial stereotypes that Kant expressed. This exclusion is legitimized when postcolonial scholars treat aesthetics as an absolute polarity to struggle, poverty, and the non-Western. One could argue that the postcolonial agenda is to show that disinterest is not an ideal, and that other approaches to literature are not inferior. However, I think that Boehmer's argument about the problem of combining postcolonial (social) literature with the 'purely aesthetic' is forcing postcolonial literature to define itself within a system of art that may be somewhat dated in the context of contemporary art practice. What is 'purely' aesthetic and what is just a 'little' aesthetic or non-aesthetic? Are these predefined categories meaningful or useful in a world where the meanings of art and aesthetics have been expanded? The debate about postcolonial literature and aesthetics could benefit from distinguishing between autonomous art and autonomous aesthetic experience, and by challenging the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous art. First, I will scrutinise how Shiner explains why the link from Kantian aesthetics to autonomous art seems meaningful in the modern system of fine art.

2.2 The separation of autonomous and heteronomous art

Shiner sees Kant as a part of a bigger societal change in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is very important to stress that Shiner reads Kant in relation to the rise of the fine art category. Because Kant wrote little of art and was instead mostly interested in aesthetic experiences of nature, I quote Shiner to highlight the influence the reception of Kant has had on the modern art institution. Shiner's writings on the reception of Kant in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are interesting to discuss in relation to Boehmer's interpretation of Kant,

because both writings focus the consequences of Kant's aesthetics, a genealogy, rather than on his actual writings. This genealogy becomes evident when Boehmer writes, 'The recourse to the a priori and the universal, while closely associated with Kant's philosophy, covertly or overtly underlies the greater majority of aesthetic speculations and statements, postcolonial or otherwise' (Boehmer, 2010, 172). Shiner can shed some light on why Boehmer considers Kant's idea of universal *a priori* aesthetics important for aesthetic speculations in general, and why she associates the aesthetic with autonomous art.

According to Shiner's cultural history, the eighteenth century saw the rise of the art public and the birth of the modern institution of fine art, and the move away from the 'old' system of art, where there was not a clear divide between artist and artisan.¹² The transition from patronage to market, the popularity of the picturesque tours, and the opening of the Louvre in 1793 all contributed to what he describes as the 'invention' of the fine art system. The term *Beaux-arts* was first explicitly coined in the treatise *Les beaux arts réduit à un même principe* from 1746 by Abbé Batteux. Activities defined as very different before (poetry, sculpture, and painting), were now grouped together under the term *fine art*. These separate activities were merged together because they had subjective qualities like pleasure, beauty, and joy as their main function, in opposition to natural science, which was responsible for society's theoretical and moral knowledge (Shiner, 2001, 97–98). One of Shiner's main theses is that the invention of the modern fine art category was based on the separation of craft from art, the artisan from the artist, and the labourer from the creative 'genius'. The 'fine art' category initiated the institutional division between heteronomous and autonomous art. It distinguished utility and service from the self-contained work, and the pleasurable and entertaining from a distinct and elevated aesthetic experience (Shiner, 2001, 75–152). In the case of literature, this implied the division of 'Letters' into imaginative and general literature. Shiner argues that although treatises on poetry date back to Aristotle, literary criticism in the modern sense of reviews of current works of belles-lettres was fully institutionalised only in the eighteenth century (Shiner, 2001, 88). Shiner mentions Schiller's journal *Horen* as an example of trying to separate literary fine art from works of instruction or entertainment (Shiner, 2001, 88–89).

With the rise of public institutions such as museums, academies, and theatres came the debate about how the public should behave towards art. This quickly became a discussion about 'the problem of taste', i.e. how to define the qualities of a person with good taste and

¹² Shiner contrasts the 'old system of art' with the 'new system of (fine) art' (Shiner, 2001, 11). He calls both systems.

the right attitude towards art (Shiner, 2001, 137). When Shiner writes about Kant and Hume it is to trace their influence on this question, and on the social dynamics within the art institution when trying to address this question. This is why I find Shiner useful to contextualize Boehmer's writing on Kant, the aesthetic and the postcolonial: 'By systematically integrating the polarities of aesthetic versus purpose, artist versus artisan, and fine art versus craft, Kant offered a powerful philosophical justification for the modern system of art', Shiner concludes (Shiner, 2001, 148).

2.2.1 Liberating aesthetics from luxury and power

In the modern system of art that arose in the eighteenth century, the majority of women were expected to occupy the 'lesser' crafts – pottery, drawing, sewing, and so on. The coloured and the vulgar poor were also eliminated from the group of people perceived to have good taste or interest in fine arts. Considering this fact alone, it is easy to recognize why postcolonial scholars are sceptical about the legacy of the doctrine of the autonomy of art that is so defining for the modern system of art. However, an important objection can be made. Shiner writes, 'The critique of upper-class luxury was probably as important to the construction of the modern idea of the aesthetic as the rejection of the lower-class and female-identified pleasure of sense and utility' (Shiner, 2001, 139). Display, decoration, and luxury were not considered aesthetic, or signs of good taste. Lord Kames separated those who used riches ostentatiously from those in touch with the aesthetic (Shiner, 2001, 140). I argue that distancing the aesthetic from the luxuriously rich in the 18th-century idea of the aesthetic distanced the aesthetic from not only the poor or 'colonized' but also the 'colonizer'. The colonizer is driven by many interests, amongst them decoration and display, which becomes clear if one considers all the luxury and gold-plated architecture that colonial rule has made possible. One can hardly consider this decoration or display of wealth a result of disinterested contemplation. Both luxury and poverty have been difficult to reconcile with the idea of 'disinterest'. However, I think it is important to remember that the idea of aesthetics as disinterested is not compatible with using art as a means of colonization. Maybe postcolonial scholars could benefit from further examining what the separation of luxury, decoration, and display from aesthetics has meant for the writing and reading of postcolonial literature. Does the foundation of Kantian aesthetics have to lead only to reactionary arguments about postcolonial literature, as Boehmer fears? Postcolonial critics can appropriate the elements that are useful without uncritically accepting the whole system.

2.2.2 Autonomous experience and autonomous art

As I have mentioned, both Shiner (directly) and Boehmer (indirectly) discuss the sociological aspects of the Kantian aesthetics that are dominant in the modern system of fine art. Now I will reflect upon how the intermingling of the terms ‘literature’ and ‘aesthetics’ and ‘sociology’ and ‘aesthetics’, may have affected Boehmer’s analysis and the postcolonial analysis of aesthetics. Discussing Kant’s aesthetic in the sociological and historical context of literature is in many ways a paradox, because Kant was interested in *a priori* aesthetics. Kant describes a mental faculty not determined by these social concepts, or by any other concepts. Concepts are not the *deciding* factor in aesthetic judgment, according to Kant’s definition. We find an object beautiful regardless of the object’s name or function; in this sense, the judgment does not rely on concepts or scientific knowledge (Kant, 1951, 64). Ironically, it is Kant’s idea of the aesthetic experience of nature that is integrated into the modern ideal of autonomous art, and not his writing on art, which appears less radical in comparison. The work of art is created and constructed, and in this sense, art always has a purpose (Kant, 1951, 164). Art requires knowledge and skill. Boehmer and Shiner consider Kant the main inspiration for the autonomy of art, but Kant also stressed that the work of art is man-made and inherently different from nature because it is a result of concepts. Kant also shows how one can claim the autonomy of aesthetic experience without automatically claiming the autonomy of art, though one can also achieve autonomous experience of art.

It is possible to argue that postcolonial literature can depict aesthetic experience as autonomous, without claiming that the works of art themselves are autonomous, and that these might be two slightly different arguments that have been merged in Boehmer’s discussion of a postcolonial aesthetic. Boehmer defines a postcolonial aesthetic as paying attention to the formal qualities of postcolonial literature. In this thesis, I will discuss aesthetics not just as the form or style of postcolonial literature. One unique characteristic of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poems is that they describe aesthetic experience. Aesthetics is therefore not only a question of form or style in the analysis of his poetry, but a thematic category that is subject to aesthetic meta-reflection. I look at how Linton Kwesi Johnson portrays aesthetic experience in his descriptions of everyday life, and the role of aesthetic experience in an otherwise politicised situation. Boehmer’s article argues that we must pay more attention to the ignored formal and structural aspect of postcolonial literature, but the article does not explicitly explain why this is necessary. What is the consequence, and why is it a problem that form or aesthetics is neglected? This thesis is interested in exploring what

aesthetic experience means for those who are labelled postcolonial subjects, and how poetry depicts this experience. Exploring the aesthetic dimension of postcolonial literature is not just a question of applying more close reading to postcolonial texts; it is also a question of acknowledging aesthetic experience as a part of postcolonial experience in general. It is therefore not only a question of how we perceive the postcolonial work of art; it is also a question of how we perceive postcolonial lives. We must look at how postcolonial literature depicts aesthetic experience to be able to better formulate why it is wrong to neglect the aesthetic dimension of postcolonial literature and what the consequence of doing so is.

2.3 Beyond the postcolonial vs the aesthetic

When Boehmer states that it is the idea of universal *a priori* aesthetics that has been difficult to accept for postcolonialism, she shows that many postcolonial scholars do not accept the most fundamental component of Kantian aesthetics. Postcolonial theory is interested in how history, culture, social relations, power, gender, and ethnicity shape subjectivity and experience. One can argue that postcolonial theory is mostly interested in *a posteriori* aesthetics, whereas Kant is discussing *a priori* aesthetics. Shiner argues that there is a conflict between Kant's concept of the universal *sensus communis* and his racial and cultural prejudices. Shiner writes:

Although it is perhaps an exaggeration to call this universalizing strain in writers from Shaftesbury to Schiller 'aesthetic democracy', it is true that social, racial and gender prejudices often stood in tension with a professed belief in a common humanity and aesthetic experience' (Shiner, 2001, 151).

In Shiner's rhetoric, the belief in a common aesthetic experience is considered the idealistic and democratic aspect of Kant's aesthetic, as it implies a belief in a common humanity. It is the democratic aspect and idea of equality, and not the prejudices, that the contemporary French thinker Jacques Rancière appropriates in his theory of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. He postulates that there is aesthetics at the core of politics, and politics at the core of aesthetics. According to Rancière's definition, politics is fundamentally democratic, and he gives aesthetics a central role in democracy. Rancière argues that aesthetic autonomy is the autonomy of a form of sensory perception, and not the autonomy of artistic 'making' celebrated by modernism.¹³ He also argues that the aesthetic identification of art challenges the opposition between art for art's sake and art in the service of politics (Rancière, 2009, 33). Rancière shows that the autonomy of the aesthetic experience of

¹³ Rancière considers medium specificity the most central theses of modernism (Rancière, 2004, 29).

literature is not necessarily synonymous with formalist or autonomous literature. Autonomous literature's claim to universality is therefore not the same as autonomous aesthetic experience's claim to universality. Rancière and Shiner offer an alternative framework that can explain how Johnson depicts aesthetic experience as autonomous, but how he also can be seen as part of a long tradition of resistance against the hierarchy between art and craft, abstraction and representation, autonomous and heteronomous art

2.3.1 Art against art-divided

As I have already mentioned, Kant's writing on nature might seem more radical to a contemporary reader than his writing on art is. When Kant writes about art, he distinguishes between mechanical and aesthetic art. Mechanical art is based on rules, concepts, and technique. Aesthetic art is based on creative power, originality, and genius (Kant, 1951, 149). Mechanical art can have only complimentary beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*), while aesthetic art has free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) (Kant, 1951, 65). According to Kant, aesthetic art is a source of beauty when we are conscious of it as art, but it appears as nature. Understanding the rules and technique applied, or understanding the work rationally, is not enough to grasp the work entirely. Even though art is designed, it must not seem designed to us (Kant, 1951, 149). Kant also argues that art differs significantly from handicraft. The former is considered play, while the latter is considered work (Kant, 1951, 147). Kant's separation of mechanical and aesthetic art is quite interesting in relation to what Shiner describes as the institutional separation of craft and fine art (heteronomous and autonomous art). Kant's view of mechanical and aesthetic art is an example of how art has been divided into autonomous art that is aesthetic and art that is merely entertaining or useful.

Shiner writes that there has been a long tradition of resistance against this underlying polarity of the fine art system. The division of art and craft that was institutionalized in the eighteenth century became an even bigger gulf in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the term 'fine art' became transformed into just 'art', so that the labels 'art' and 'artist' became increasingly synonymous with autonomy, genius, and spiritual elevation, and the artisan became even more associated with dependency and trade, and after the industrial revolution – with the factory (Shiner, 2001, 225–226). The invention of photography made the relationship between science and art, the mechanic/craftsman and the artist, more complex. It also created a new awareness of art's relation to the 'real'. However, the assimilation of photography into the art institution

proved that the underlying art versus craft polarity was quick to adapt to new mediums. The rise of pictorialism was a way of distancing photography from mechanics and craft. Aligning photography with the originality and expressionism of painting justified photography's status as fine art (Shiner, 2001, 230).

Shiner writes that a lot of art from the mid nineteenth century and onwards has been motivated by wanting to challenge 'art divided', the idea of fine art versus craft, and the idea of autonomous art separated from life. He argues that this resistance is present in three periods: 1830–1890, 1890–1960, and 1950–present. The years from 1950 to present are most relevant to my argument because this period represents the most important postcolonial period. Before I get to Shiner's analysis of the resistance of the present period (1950–present), I have to address what Shiner describes as the triumph of modernism and formalism in the forties and fifties. He argues that during that period, formalist theories became dominant among critics of visual arts (Clement Greenberg), literature (Cleanth Brooks), and aesthetics (Monroe Beardsley) (Shiner, 2001, 267). He also argues that a lot of the earlier art of resistance, especially the avant-garde, became assimilated into the fine art institution, a process of assimilation that Peter Bürger also examines in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). Bürger argues that the historical avant-garde failed as a project of liberation. Instead of destroying the art institution and the idea of autonomous art, the avant-garde became integrated into the art institution and modernism (Bürger, 1998). Concerning literary criticism, Shiner writes that the formalist movement of New Criticism became dominant in universities and departments: 'Students were encouraged to focus on detailed internal analysis of poems or novels rather than biographical origins or political implications' (Shiner, 2001, 267). Against this backdrop of formalism as dominant discourse, I will discuss the period 1950–present. Postcolonial literature can benefit from seeing itself as part of a general tendency to question this system of art, rather than trying to position itself within this system. In the next paragraph, I will look at how many contemporary artists believe in the value of art; they are not anti-art movements, but they do challenge art's separation from society, politics, utility or popular culture.

2.3.2 Postcolonial literature beyond autonomous literature or 'mere' writing

The Duchampian readymade had a huge influence on the fifties and onwards with the rise of pop art, performance, and conceptual art. Art after the seventies has been characterized by trying to integrate art into life, the personal with the political (Shiner, 2001, 269). Both pop

art and performance art are good examples of art that has put the difference between art and non-art into play, continuously pushing the boundaries between what we can call art and what we can call 'praxis of life' (Bürger, 1998). There has also been a steady increase in public art commissioned by governments, and works of art being taken out of the galleries and into public spaces (Shiner, 2001, 297). Shiner asks if we might be approaching a third system of art 'beyond art and craft' that seeks to unite artistic freedom and creativity with service and function (Shiner, 2001, 269–301).

However, what does the division of art and craft mean in the case of literature, and how does postcolonial literature contribute to challenging this division? Postcolonial literature's contribution to challenging this division in literature is the main reason for using Shiner's analysis as a frame of reference for my own argument. Shiner writes: 'The literary version of the art-versus-craft polarity is the division between an autonomous "literature" appreciated for itself and "mere writing" aimed at ordinary pleasure or utility' (Shiner, 2001, 284). My argument is that postcolonial literature should not be forced to choose sides, but rather be examined as a different way of thinking about the relationship between literature and life that is gaining more and more momentum, even though the old dichotomy is still imprinted in our understanding of art. Shiner argues that the anti-art dream to dismantle existing institutions is not the answer to the problem of art divided: 'We would simply be reversing an invidious polarity rather than healing a fracture that occurred long ago. The answer to art divided is not to reject such ideals as freedom, imagination and creativity but to unite them with facility, service and function' (Shiner, 2001, 307). To resist art divided, one must accept that something is literature and therefore demands its own mode of attention, but simultaneously one must be able to accept literature's relationship to other modes of attention and other aspects of life. Shiner concludes:

In pluralistic democracies there will probably always be multiple art worlds, including small coteries who will consider only the most daunting and esoteric works or the most socially and politically shocking works to be 'real art'. But most people will participate in several kinds of art worlds, moving across the old divisions and hierarchies and juggling more or less successfully the relationships among art, religion, politics, and everyday life (Shiner, 2001, 307).

It is in this perspective that Linton Kwesi Johnson's poems show how one can move across the old divisions of art divided, and that art and politics, the postcolonial and the aesthetic are juggled in his depictions of everyday life in London. Michel A. Bucknor, editor of *Journal of West Indian Literature* and *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, offers an intriguing statement in the article 'Dub Poetry as Postmodern Art Form': 'Dub

poetry is Jamaica's gift of a new art-form to the literary world' (Bucknor, 2011, 255). With this statement in mind, I will now proceed to an examination of how Johnson's poems demonstrate that postcolonial literature does not only make us think differently about history, but can also offer us new ways of thinking about art, literature, and aesthetics. These ways of thinking challenge the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous literature, 'the aesthetic' and 'the postcolonial'.

3 Dub poetry: a self-aware form of literary criticism

Linton Kwesi Johnson is a pioneer of dub poetry. When Johnson started writing, he called his poetry ‘reggae poetry’ to describe what he was doing. The name was inspired by the term ‘jazz poetry’, but instead of jazz, Johnson’s poetry was inspired by the reggae tradition. Reggae is a form of music that originated in Jamaica in the 1960’s, characterized by offbeat guitar, and emphasis on rhythm and bass. Nevertheless, he soon felt the term ‘reggae poetry’ was inaccurate. In 1974, he coined the term ‘dub poetry’ to describe how reggae deejays, who toasted over instrumentals called dubs in Jamaica, were in fact making a form of spontaneous poetry.¹⁴ He was surprised when critics started calling him a dub poet, and he expressed discomfort with the label (Markham, 1989, 256). The poems he wrote were not spontaneous or originally set to music, and the term therefore increasingly came to refer to poetry with a built in reggae rhythm. He first felt that this was a misguided use of the term, but has now accepted the label (Habekost, 1993, 5) Johnson, like many other poets, is not satisfied with being pigeonholed, and he would rather just be called a poet than a ‘dub poet’ or a ‘reggae poet’ (Wheatle, 2009). However, his poetry is inspired by the reggae tradition and the term ‘dub poetry’ is currently the most practical and established genre term to describe poetry under reggae influence. The attempt to formulate a reggae aesthetic in poetry has many elements in common with attempts to define jazz poetry. Michael A. Bucknor writes in the article ‘Dub Poetry as Postmodern Art Form’:

The early discordant reception of print dub foreshadows the way in which reception would loom large in dub poetry’s history, announces some of the larger ideological issues of aesthetic taste and judgement in Caribbean criticism and signals the way it has both forced and facilitated new form of critical practice. By its fierce revolutionary stance on the value and limits of art to a postcolonial society, it also seems to insist on a self-critical, self-aware practice (Bucknor, 2011, 258).

There have been many revisions of what the definition of ‘dub poetry’ should be. There have also been many discussions within Caribbean literary circles about the quality and value of dub poetry. Bucknor argues that dub poetry and its reception have become an important site for discussing some of the large ideological issues concerning the relationship between literature, aesthetics, taste, art, and the postcolonial society. Most importantly, he argues that dub poetry facilitates new modes of critical practice in a self-critical and self-aware fashion.

¹⁴ A Jamaican deejay is not to be confused with a disc jockey. A deejay toasts or talks over rhythms and has more in common with what we today call a rapper or an MC.

Johnson's ambivalence towards the term dub poetry shows that debates and critical discussions about the nature of dub poetry have always been running parallel to the poems. Bucknor describes the poem 'Bass Culture' as 'meta dub' that 'reflects self-consciously on the value of reggae music for dub poetry's political activism' (Bucknor, 2011, 262). Calling the poem 'Bass Culture' a meta dub is relevant to my argument that Johnson's poetry *discusses* the relationship between aesthetic experience and a postcolonial resistance.

When Johnson first started to use the term 'dub poetry', it was to argue that deejays that toasted over dub instrumentals ought to be considered poets. Johnson writes in the article 'Jamaican rebel music' (1976), 'The "dub-lyricist" is the DJ turned poet', and, 'Dub-lyricist include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others' (Johnson, 1976, 398). These are all reggae artists that are generally not defined as poets. Calling them poets without any hesitation illustrates how Johnson's poetry and criticism engage in a discussion about the nature of poetry, and what we define as poetry. Dub poetry can be discussed as a form of literary criticism that challenges the hierarchic view of languages, styles, and themes in poetry. In an interview in 1986, Johnson said that if he had achieved anything at all with his poetry, it was that he had shown black youth in Britain that you do not have to be immersed in classical literature or to have gone to university to write poetry (Markham, 1989, 261). The postcolonial critique in Johnson's poetry is inseparable from questions of what we consider poetic, and what we define as aesthetic.

3.1 Jamaican: Blurring the written and the spoken

The language is the first feature you notice when faced with Johnson's poems. Johnson writes his poems in Jamaican Creole spoken in Jamaica, known locally as *patois*. There exists a Creole continuum between patois, Jamaican English, and Standard English. The more educated or upper class people are, the more they tend to speak Standard English with Jamaican differences. However, the difference between patois and Standard English is very significant, and patois often needs translation on British television. The patois Linton Kwesi Johnson writes is closer to Jamaican spoken by ordinary poor or working-class Jamaicans. The language also has elements of London slang, and therefore of a patois spoken by Jamaicans in England, more specifically Brixton. The use of patois gives associations to language and to people that are not usually a part of the elite or educated class in society, not even in Jamaica. It is in many ways the language of the common person in Jamaica, and in Brixton.

Patois is an oral, and not initially a written language. Jamaicans learn to write only Standard English. Even though there have been attempts by linguists to create standardised forms for Jamaican patois, it is what the editors of the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* have called ‘by no means homogeneous’ (Cassidy and Le Page, 1980, xi). Linguists are still trying to agree on unified spelling systems, as there are many variations, and the rules and grammar of patois are usually unconscious for Jamaicans. It is typical for authors to invent their own phonetic spelling (Adams, 1991). Jamaican patois has been treated as ungrammatical or second-rate English. Johnson uses this historically low form to question the norms and standards of good poetry, and the assumptions of what makes elevated and low forms of language. One example of this is that Johnson spells the same word differently in different poems. Here are some examples: music/muzik, rhythm/riddim, violence/vialence, your/you, forward/fahwod, history/histri. This inconsistency is a good example of how the Jamaican language is inhomogeneous and not standardized, and how Johnson uses these characteristics of the language to create formal experimentation. The fact that he uses some spellings that are more towards Standard English, in combination with strictly phonetic representation of patois, expresses the Creole continuum. Because of this fact, Johnson’s written poems have many oral features, and he does challenge the opposition between the oral and the written. Readers will not intuitively recognize the word, because it might not be a standard spelling. Many of the words must be read aloud to be understood because of the phonetic spelling. In this way, sounds are very important for conveying meaning. The use of Jamaican patois inherently problematizes the hierarchy between poetry and ordinary speech, and the difference between print and sound.

3.2 Dub as technique and genre

Dub originated in Jamaica in the late sixties. In Jamaica, a dub was originally the B-side of a 7-in. single that was simply called a ‘version’ because it was a different, often instrumental, version of the original A-side vocal track (Barrow and Dalton, 1997). A dub is originally an instrumental remix of an original, where the bass and drums are amplified and tweaked into the foreground. A dub deconstructs a song into its components, and manipulates and recomposes the separate components through electronic equipment and machines. The genre was the result of experimentation in a recording studio, whereby the studio itself became an instrument. This deconstructing and recomposing method is an important fundament of contemporary electronic music production, especially within house, drum and bass, and

techno. Many of these remix techniques originated in Jamaican dub. Something that contemporary electronic music also recognizes as a techno or house remix, with heavy bass, reverb, and echo, is sometimes still just called a dub, even though it may have stylistically little in common with Jamaican reggae dubs (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 374).¹⁵ It is useful to have in mind that there are two parallel but slightly different nuances of the word ‘dub’: dub as a musical method that can be ascribed to any musical genres, and dub as a subgenre of reggae music one can recognize even though one does not know the production method. These aspects intersect, but illustrate that dub has a dual meaning: It is a technique and a particular musical genre. Dub is by definition a version of an original, but in later times (especially in the nineties), there are examples of bands imitating the dub sound and making dubs that do not have originals. These attempts are marginal, and purists will argue that they cannot be classified as dubs. However, these attempts reveal that dub sounds different from a lot of other reggae music, and therefore dub can be perceived as genre in itself. When discussing dub in relation to Johnson’s poetry, I will look at dub both as a method and as a particular style one can recognize in his work. Dub is something one can understand in terms of both the writing and the reading process in Johnson’s poetry.

3.3 Dub as literary device and cultural reference

I will try to illustrate how dub can be understood as both method and style by analysing the poem ‘Dread Beat an Blood’. This is the poem in its entirety:

brothers an sisters rocking¹⁶
a dread beat pulsing fire burning

chocolate hour an darkness creeping night

black veiled night is weeping
electric lights consoling night

a small hall soaked in smoke
a house of ganja mist

music blazing sounding thumping fire blood
brother an sisters rocking stopping rocking
music breaking out bleeding out thumping out fire burning¹⁷

¹⁵ The documentary *Dub Echoes* (2008), directed by Bruno Natal, is a thorough examination of the influence dub has had on contemporary electronic music.

¹⁶ There is punctuation at the end of almost every line in the first edition. This is also the case for all the other poems in the edition.

¹⁷ This stanza is typed much more compactly in the first edition, and there is a full stop and not spacing between ‘fire’ and ‘blood’. ‘Burning’ is isolated in a fourth line under ‘fire’.

electric hour of the red bulb
staining the brain with a blood flow
an a bad bad thing is brewing

ganja crawling, creeping to the brain
cold lights hurting breaking hurting
fire in the head an a dread beat bleeding beating fire dread

rocks rolling over hearts leaping wild
rage rising out of the heat an the hurt
an a fist curled in anger reaches a her
then flash of a blade from another to a him
leaps out for a dig of a flesh of a piece of skin
an blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding (Johnson, 2006, 5).

The words ‘burning’, ‘night’, ‘blood’, ‘burning’ and ‘dread’ are separated from the rest of the text. Rhetorical pauses precede these five words. However, this pause or delaying of the last word in a line is reminiscent of how the vocals are often fragmented, chopped, and delayed in dub production. Although dub is mainly an instrumental genre, one of its most recognizable features is the omitted or fragmented lyrics created by the mute and fader controls in the studio (Veal, 2007, 64). The reader imagines a pause or a break before the last word. The reader does not imagine this pause being filled by silence, but rather by a beat or a bass line. After ‘beat pulsing fire’, the reader imagines a pulsating beat. The use of the word ‘pulsing’ gives an impression of a beat continuing in the gap between ‘fire’ and ‘burning’. Poet and professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Kwame Dawes, writes about the continuity and consistency of the reggae bass and drum pattern in *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing*: ‘Indeed, the patterns of reggae are often established by silence and not sound. The listener is aware of the rhythm for it has been established early on in the track, and so when it is pulled out, the listener is still hearing it despite what is going on above’ (Dawes, 1999, 105). An imagined rhythm continues in the gaps, and the rhythm is therefore not defined only by the verbal in the poem. ‘Music blazing sounding thumping fire’ also creates an impression of the rhythm continuing in the gap before ‘blood’. However, there is a full stop instead of a gap there in the first edition, and there are gaps and line shifts in the first edition that are not in the *Selected Poems* edition. The different editions therefore have this rhythmic effect and emphasis in different places. This difference shows how dub’s concept of ‘version’ creates literary form. If we consider that dub is a version or a remix, then it is possible to look at the different editions as different versions/dubs with small variations. In this sense, the poems, like Jamaican Creole, exist in a continuum and not in one standardized form.

The gerunds ‘rocking’, ‘pulsing’, ‘creeping’, and ‘thumping’ create an impression of the beat unfolding or evolving in the poem. ‘Music blazing’ gives the impression that the poem describes a piece of music unfolding and being experienced as we read. If one thinks of dub as a musical technique that inspires Johnson’s poetics, then the pauses can be understood as instrumental or rhythmic breaks. To a certain degree, the poem recreates the feeling of layering in dub, where the lyrics appear and disappear, revealing that the rhythm is a separate layer. One could argue that this imagination will require some knowledge of Johnson’s live recordings, because these gaps then are actually filled by music. However, the gaps are even more visually evident in the printed version of the poem. This difference says something about the relationship between dub music and dub poetry. The poetry is not just lyrics to a song that is written down, but does enhance and bring attention to other aspects of dub. Dub poetry can borrow certain concepts and strategies from dub production, and enhance them by using literary devices like line breaks, pauses, and gaps. However, there is a difference between dub music and dub poetry, and Johnson has been interested in retaining that difference.

The kind of poetry I was writing, that I am known for, at least, would be written in a way that a poetic idea would come to me as a musical one. The two would be the same thing – a musical idea or a poetic idea. I can’t find any better way of putting it. But eventually I found that I was getting closer to the music, and trying to write within the strict parameters of reggae form which is very limiting. You’re not conscious of it at the time, but you get drawn closer and closer and closer to the music until in the end what you’re doing is basically making reggae songs or composing reggae music (Markham, 1989, 260).

He has expressed fear of being understood as a musician and not a poet. Johnson puts the difference between music, literature, and performance into play without wanting to dissolve the categories. He insists that what he does is poetry and not something else, but his poetry is not in isolation from other artistic mediums.

I have pointed out how dub offers some literary structural devices and writing techniques. Another characteristic of the poem is that there are references to the reggae dub *tradition* and *subculture* that make the dub characteristics visible. ‘Ganja’ is the patois slang for marijuana. In the poem, ganja serves as a cultural signifier because of its strong association to dub culture. Dub is created to be played aloud on a sound system, which is a Jamaican version of a mobile discotheque. Sound systems where people go to listen to dub will often be filled with ‘ganja mist’. Christian Habekost argues that dub has a technical meaning for the music business, ‘But in Jamaica it has further, far-reaching connotations. Dub, a musical genre in itself, has become a whole movement with many different facets and perspectives’ (Habekost, 1993, 53). Ganja becomes a cultural code that makes the dub

characteristics of the poem evident, not only as a formal device or technique, but also as a style the reader can recognize by understanding the cultural symbols and metaphors that are characteristic themes of the dub as specific genre and subculture. The dub influence on poetry is visible as a structural and formal dimension, but it also consists of cultural codes and symbolism that are shaped by a cultural context, and that cannot be fully understood by a purely structuralist reading. Dub's dialogue between technique and subculture is one of the reasons why I find it necessary to balance the relationship between form and context in my readings.

3.4 Dub: Confusing pleasure and pain, good and bad

Ganja is mentioned once more in the poem 'Dread Beat an Blood' together with a red bulb, giving associations to a dimly lit and smoke-filled dancehall:

electric hour of the red bulb,
staining the brain with a blood flow
an a bad bad thing is brewing

ganja crawling, creeping to the brain
cold lights hurting breaking hurting
fire in the head an a dread beat bleeding beating fire dread (Johnson, 2006, 5).

'A bad bad thing is brewing' gives the combination of light, ganja, and loud music a paranoid and hallucinatory atmosphere, anticipating something that is 'creeping' closer. The final stanza of the poem ends with a violent attack resulting in 'blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding'. The poem starts with an image of someone rocking steadily to the musical pulse, and ends with an explosion where the pulse starts 'bleeding'. The title 'Dread Beat an Blood' is difficult to translate, but means something close to 'blood, sweat and tears'. The title expresses hardship, struggle, and strength, and makes the musical 'beat' an important symbol in conveying these feelings. In many ways, 'beat' replaces 'sweat' and 'tears', but conveys a similar meaning. Blood becomes a metaphor for the bass, where the bass first is a contained pulse and ends in a climax of bleeding. The bass is a powerful force that has the power to move and to destroy the walls and veins that try to contain it. The bass can easily go from being pleasant to painful, and this gives the bass a violent potential. This violent potential is important because it confuses the difference between good and bad, pleasure and pain.

Bass is violent, in the sense that it can both do damage to our bodies and aggravate or trigger violent confrontation. The volume of the bass can cause nausea or headaches, but it

can also enhance an aggressive atmosphere in a dance hall crammed with people. The bass usually climaxes at the point where it becomes too loud. A good song or dub is often called 'wicked' in Jamaican slang. 'A bad bad thing is brewing' has an ambiguous meaning. Something bad might be about to happen, like paranoia, tinnitus, or a fight breaking out. However, musically speaking, a bad thing might be a good thing. Music, and especially bass music, can hurt in a good way.

The sound systems are notorious for playing extremely loud. Standing right in front of the heap of speakers can be both a pleasurable and a distressing experience. In a 1981 *New Musical Express* review of the legendary sound system operated by Jah Shaka, the journalist addresses this painful aspect: 'Some people complain, say Shaka carries too much weight, too much distortion. It's true it can verge on pain when Shaka shakes a sound by the neck till it gives off its secret. He is an extreme artist' (*New Musical Express*, 1981, 21). It is a thin line between making the bass loud enough to make a pleasurable physical impact, and having the bass damage hearing and cause pain. Sometimes the bass will feel most pleasurable in your stomach when your ears have already started to feel discomfort. In this sense, the hurt is also a part of what makes the music good. The music's 'burning' and 'bleeding' has a positive meaning that asserts its power and force.¹⁸ In the poem 'Bass Culture' the music is described as 'hattah dan di hites of fire / livin heat doun volcano core', 'latent powah', and 'thunda-wise' (Johnson, 2006, 15). Volcano and thunder are images that make the music a frightening, extreme, and strong natural force: 'like a frightful form / like a righteous harm / giving off wild like is madness' (Johnson, 2006, 14). Bass can be a frightful form of experience, but the 'harm' it causes has a righteous aspect when it asserts the listener's strength and endurance. The bass shakes the body, but by dancing, the listener can 'groove' with the bass in a controlled manner. Individuals show strength by not being overrun or distressed by the bass, but resist and control it in their rhythmic movements.

The poem's diction aspires towards the power the beat and the bass have. Johnson believes that the lyricist 'gives poetic or lyrical expression to what the music expresses' (Johnson, 1976, 405). Johnson's use of words is inspired by the aggression and violence that can be found in dub music. Words and phrases like 'bleeding', 'wailing blood', 'dig of a flesh', 'darkness creeping', and 'black veiled night' create a somewhat intimidating atmosphere. The vocabulary makes me wonder if the words have been chosen to keep the reader just a little on edge, as if the poet wants the poem to be feared. In the poem 'Bass

¹⁸ In the same *NME* article, the pain's positive quality is addressed: 'If Shaka's sound sticks needles in your ears, it's like acupuncture stirring the sluggish circulation of the blood' (*New Musical Express*, 1981, 27).

Culture' the sixth stanza creates the impression that the narrator wants to shake, shock, or frighten the reader: 'SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK! / What a beat!' (Johnson, 2006, 16). The sudden change to capital letters and exclamation mark makes the words appear shouted or louder than the other words. This sudden change of 'volume' and emphasis is similar to how certain isolated elements, especially the bass, are suddenly turned up in a dub. This literary device also appears in the poem 'Double Scank': 'When I site breddah Buzza / bappin in style / comin doun FRONT LINE' (Johnson, 2006, 4). The words have a sudden change in volume that catches the reader's attention and that asserts that the words are coming at you with violence, attitude, and power. This effect also creates a feeling of layering. Where the pause is reminiscent of the layering between the words and the rhythm in dub, this effect creates a feeling that there are several volume levels in the poem.

'SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!' is also an onomatopoeia that mimics the sound of the reggae offbeat guitar. This is an obvious example of mimesis, where the literary tries to express what reggae music expresses. The onomatopoeia's loudness is also an example of a frightening literary form. 'What a beat!' reveals that the loudness and frightfulness are positive qualities, qualities that make the beat good and that give the poem the desired impact and power.

If we consider that the poetry aspires to the violence and power of bass, poetry can be frightening, powerful, violent, and pleasurable simultaneously for the reader. The dub tradition's use of words such as 'bad' and 'wicked' to describe things that are good also confuses and subverts the difference between good and bad poetry. Johnson's poems combine the harmonic and the pleasurable with something unpleasant, aggressive, or over the top. A sentence like 'blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding', in the poem 'Dread Beat an Blood', has an extensive use of alliteration. The excessive images of blood are perhaps over the top, at least according to some standards of good writing. In addition, he also excessively uses capitalisation in the poems in the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*, which is toned down in the *Selected Poems* edition. The poem 'Yout Scene' is the most remarkable case of this modification. The four words 'BRIXTON', 'HIP CITY', 'MUSICAL BEAT', and 'WICKED' are *all* capitalised in *Dread Beat and Blood*, while *none* of them are capitalised in *Selected Poems*. The perfectly balanced or subtle poem is not necessarily an ideal in dub poetry. There has to be too much of something, something on the verge of painful or bad. The reader has to be on edge, waiting for the moment the words balance on the thin line that separates the pleasurable poetic climax from the painfully manic exaggeration.

4 Bass as aesthetic experience

4.1 Reading the bass line: Bass as form and content

Many of Johnson's poems portray musical happenings and events, especially at sound systems. A sound system was a typical location Jamaicans in Brixton would go to party and listen to music in the seventies. A sound system is a Jamaican version of a mobile discotheque, consisting of massive speakers piled atop each other. The sound system is set up in an open, fenced-off space outside, or set up inside a hall. The space, inside or outside, is called a dance hall (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 377). The poem 'Bass Culture' is about being at a sound system, and about the aesthetic experience of listening to the heavy bass thumping out of the gigantic speakers:

muzik of blood
black reared
pain rooted
heart geared

all tensed up
in di bubble an di bounce
an di leap and di weight-drop

it is di beat of di heart
this pulsing of blood
that is a bubblin bass
a bad bad beat
pushin gainst di wall
whe bar black blood

an is a whole heappa
passion a gather
like a frightful form
like a righteous harm
giving off wild like is madness

bad out deh¹⁹

hattah dan di hites of fire
livin heat doun volcano core
is di cultural wave a dread people deal²⁰

spirits riled
an rise and rail thunda-wise
latent powah
in a form resemblin madness
like violence is di show
burstin outta slave shackle
look ya! boun fi harm di wicked

man feel him
him hurt confirm
man site
destruction all aroun
man turn
love still confirm
him destiny a shine lite-wise
soh life tek the form whe shif from calm
an hold di way of a deadly storm

culture pulsing
high temprature blood
swingin anger
shatterin di tightened hold
the false fold
round flesh whe wail freedom
bittah cause a blues
cause a maggot suffering
cause a blood klaat pressure²¹
yet still breedin love
far more mellow
than di soun of shapes
chanting loudly

SCATTA- MATTA- SHATTA- SHACK!
What a beat!

for di time is nigh
when passion gather high
when di beat jus lash
when di wall mus smash
an di beat will shif
as di culture alltah
when oppression scatah (Johnson, 2006, 14–16).

¹⁹ This line is capitalized ('BAD OUT DEY') in the first edition. 'Deh' is spelled 'dey'.

²⁰ There is an exclamation point after 'core' and 'deal' in the first edition. Devices that create exaggeration and emphasis are generally toned down in *Selected Poems*.

²¹ 'Blood klaat' is a Jamaican curse word that refers to a cloth that contains menstrual blood, which creates contrast to 'Yet still breedin love'. Notice the extreme juxtaposition of the decent and indecent, the high and low poetic object. This is another example of using strong or over the top literary devices, rather than subtle ones.

The ‘bubble an di bounce’, ‘bubblin bass’, and ‘di leap and di weight-drop’ describe the nature, intensity, and specific qualities of the bass soundscape. The pulsating blood and beating heart gives the bass organic qualities, and creates an image of bass being experienced as a rhythmic natural force rather than something artificial, composed, or purposefully structured. The bass is so strong that it is ‘pushin gainst di wall’. Bass has a strong physical presence in the room and can be observed in the vibrations of objects. The deeper the bass is, the more the room vibrates. The bass is always contained; by walls when the sound system is inside a house, and by the surrounding architecture when it is outside. When the bass pushes against the wall, it has to be very deep and loud. Bass is something that is configured within the room and that is felt as strong spatial and physical presence.

The poem’s extensive use of alliteration enhances the element of bass in the poem. The consonant ‘b’ rhymes and reminds the reader of the word ‘bass’ in the title. The consonant ‘b’ also denotes the voiced bilabial plosive. Reading all the ‘b’s’ in the poem makes the poem feel bass-heavy, making the reader aware of the bass in the reader’s own voice or thoughts. Johnson has expressed how important music, and particularly bass, is for his poetics: ‘There was always a beat, or a bass line, going on at the back of my head with the words. And so I developed this style of writing – always with music in mind, always hearing music when I’m composing my poetry or writing my poetry’ (Markham, 1989, 253). Hearing oneself pronouncing the ‘b’s’ is an interesting parallelism to the bass as heartbeat and pulse. Both create an image of the bass line as something that is felt from within, and that is physical. In ‘Bass Culture’, what Johnson describes as the bass line going on at the back of one’s head, becomes evident. As one reads the poem, the bass line evolves. The poem describes the experience of bass as the readers individually experience bass while reading. The experience of bass is a result of the poem’s formal qualities, but ‘Bass Culture’ also places this aesthetic experience as the theme and content of the poem. In this way, the aesthetic experience of bass is a result of the poem’s formal qualities, but is also the motif and the content of the poem.

4.2 The *a priori* and physical experience of bass

When the ‘bubblin bass’ is coupled with ‘a bad bad beat’, it becomes evident that the bass is one component of a musical piece. However, since the bass is emphasised in the poem’s title, the bass is privileged in the description of the music. This privileging of bass implies that dub, a subgenre of reggae, is the portrayed form of music. As mentioned, dub is essentially

an instrumental remix, where the rhythm and bass are emphasised. Sometimes a dub may have vocals, but they are often treated as a sound element that can be chopped up and rearranged (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 201–228). Listening to this music is like listening to pure sound. The effort and money that are put into building sound systems to play dub records²² are examples of how much the site-specific experience of sound matters for dub producers. It is a kind of music that sounds very different depending on the equipment and speakers used. Listening to dub at a sound system is very different from playing the records on an ordinary stereo, and the experience relies heavily on how dub is presented.

Listening to dub is an aesthetic experience, a special sensory perception that has little to do with representation or mimesis, and that depends heavily on the specificity of audio. In the article ‘Dubbing the Nation’, artist and documentarian Philip Maysles explains why dub is predominately not a mimetic or referential art form: ‘When an exclusive dub is put on, the audience is presented with a sound that has detached itself from reference to social or political conditions and to the cultural hierarchy of “downpression” in the act of erasing the words of the English language’ (Maysles, 2002, 104).²³ He does not explicitly define this experience as aesthetic here, but I argue that Maysles in the above quote implicitly treats the dub experience as an *a priori* aesthetic experience, even though the music can serve an emancipating purpose.²⁴ Listening to dub must be understood as an aesthetic experience of some kind, but what kind of aesthetic experience is it?

As we see when analysing the poem ‘Bass Culture’, bass has a very strong *physical* presence. The nature of bass challenges the classic ideal of disinterest and distance that is expressed in Kant’s writings on aesthetic judgment and beauty. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Kant distinguished between two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) that is not based on concepts and merely dependant beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*) that is based on concepts and the perfection of the object in accordance with that concept (Kant, 1951, 65). When Kant gives an example of free beauty in art, he mentions what he calls ‘music phantasies’. He defines this as music without any theme. He writes that this generally refers to all music without words (Kant, 1951, 66). Dub fits this description of ‘music phantasies’ because it is instrumental and deconstructed in terms of lyrics and theme. The influential Jamaican dub producer King Jammy actually describes dub as raw music: ‘Dub means raw riddim. Dub jus’ mean raw music nuttin’ water-down. Version is like your creativeness of the

²² Sound systems often use ‘dub plates’, which are acetate discs with exclusive versions or remixes.

²³ Rastafarians often use the word ‘downpression’ instead of oppression.

²⁴ Maysles uses the word ‘aesthetic’ other places in the article and he writes that the artist applies ‘removal, alteration and layering’ to construct ‘aesthetic space’ (p. 91).

riddim, without voice’ (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 202). King Jammy’s rhetoric about ‘raw music’ is strikingly similar to Kant’s description of music without a theme. However, Kant believed that when taste is affected by ‘charms’ and ‘emotions’, and when these pleasures become the desired end and a criterion for judging, it is always the result of a barbaric impulse (Kant, 1951, 58). Emotion is ‘a sensation in which pleasantness is produced’ (Kant, 1951, 62). Dub could initially seem to fit into Kant’s description of the free beauty in music, but bass is also physical. It is exactly the strong physical presence that makes bass complex and challenging as an aesthetic object. Bass challenges the opposition between objects we can label as aesthetic and what we can label as physically pleasant. It also challenges the idea of distance in the aesthetic experience, because one feels the bass from inside one’s body. Even though listening to the dub or bass music is an aesthetic experience, the deeper and more ‘pure’ the bass becomes, the more it starts to vibrate and make a physical impact. It is ‘pushin gainst di wall’, and its purity is inseparable from its physical impact. Bass is by nature something aesthetic that has the power to intervene and affect its context: to shake, vibrate, and move things. This is elegantly expressed in the fifth (and last) stanza of ‘Bass Culture’:

for di time is nigh
 when passion gather high
 when di beat jus lash
 an di wall mus smash
 an di beat will shif
 as di culture alltah
 when oppression scatah

In the first stanza the bass is ‘pushin gainst di wall’, in the last stanza ‘di wall mus smash’. This creates a strong and clear image of the bass *itself* as a powerful force, something that has the power to change its surroundings, and even to smash down walls. This power to break out of constraints is also evident in the smashing of veins in ‘Dread Beat an Blood’. My argument is that bass has a composite nature in Johnson’s poetry. It is something aesthetic, but it is in addition depicted as something that is forceful and that moves, and changes its surroundings. In a larger perspective, bass challenges the opposition between the aesthetic and the possibility of societal change and impact. The image of bass and the concept of ‘bass culture’ are central to understanding the role of aesthetic experience in the postcolonial context of Johnson’s poetry. Christian Habekost comments on the relationship between the dance hall experience and a rebel identity in *Verbal Riddim: The Aesthetics and Politics of Afro-Caribbean Dub Poetry*:

The dancehalls were not only a meeting point but a breeding ground for a new rebel identity among working class youth. They were the templates of what Linton Kewsi Johnson called “Bass Culture”. Here resistance took the form of a booming bass line and the explosions of a drum kit, amplified until pain and volume become one’ (Habekost, 1993, 57).

‘Bass culture’ creates a complex relationship between aesthetics and politics by depicting ‘a booming bass line’ as a form of resistance.

4.3 Bass culture: Bass and history

In the poem ‘Bass Culture’ there is an interesting link between the individual’s aesthetic experience in a specific place and time, and the individual’s position in a historically defined community. The coupling of bass with culture in the neologism ‘bass culture’ creates a special relationship between bass as something purely aesthetic and bass as something historical and social, ‘an di beat will shif / as di culture alltah’. The poem claims some kind of coherence between the beat and the culture. In ‘Bass Culture’, music reflects the experiences of the Jamaican people and is described as ‘muzik of blood’, ‘black reared’, and ‘pain rooted’, and therefore something that links the Jamaican people to their history: ‘in a form resemblin madness / like violence is di show / burstin outta slave shackle’ (Johnson, 2006, 15). The bass line links the present with the slave past. Describing bass as a kind of historical medium is a recurring theme in Johnson’s poetry. The fifth (and last) stanza in the poem ‘Reggae Sounds’ is another good example:

Shock-black bubble-down-beat bouncing
rock-wise tumble-down sound music;
foot-drop find drum, blood story,
bass history is a moving
is a hurting black story (Johnson, 2006, 17).

The first line repeats the letter ‘b’ six times and enhances the impression of bass. First, there is an emphasis on the particularity of how bass sounds, and then the poem evolves into a claim about a hurting black story. The juxtaposition of ‘drum’ and ‘blood story’, separated by just a comma, marks the close proximity of the aesthetic and the historical in the poem. The reader goes, without noticing, from thinking about ‘pure sound’ to thinking about history. The introduction of the term ‘bass history’, a variation of ‘bass culture’, adds to the importance of this concept in Johnson’s poetry. How can the reader understand the relationship between bass and history, or more specifically, the relationship between what King Jammy calls ‘raw music’, and politics in Johnson’s poems? The bass is not a representation of culture in the traditional sense of being mimetic. However, the concept of

‘bass culture’ is interesting because something as abstract and aesthetic as bass becomes the key to understanding history and culture. This is one point where Johnson’s poetry formulates ways of thinking about art outside the traditional divide of autonomous and heteronomous art.

The bass *itself* can be a way of understanding Jamaican culture and history. The experience of bass invites the listener into a community. In the article ‘Jamaican rebel music’ (1976), which Johnson published in the magazine *Race and Class*, he describes the relationship between music and history:

I shall say it again: the popular music of Jamaica, the music of the people, is an essentially experiential music, not merely in the sense that the people *experience* the music, but also in the sense that the music is true to the historical experience of the people, that the music reflects the historical experience. It is the *spiritual expression* of the *historical experience* of the Afro-Jamaican. In making the music, the musicians themselves enter a common stream of consciousness, and what they create is an invitation to the listeners to be entered into that consciousness – which is also the consciousness of their people. The feel of the music is the feel of their common history, the burden of their history [...] (Johnson, 1976, 398).

Johnson’s essay is not primarily a theoretical or academic article. His explanations are vague and not always coherent. I will look at the essay as a personal reflection on poetry and music that can contextualize some of the themes explored in Johnson’s poetry, and that can give a better understanding of Johnson’s poetics. The notion that ‘the feel of the music is the feel of their common history’, is somewhat vague as a theoretical argument, but very interesting as a poetic theme that can be further analysed and discussed. Three tendencies can be extracted from this excerpt that are useful to understand the role of aesthetic experience in Johnson’s poetry, especially in ‘Reggae Sounds’ and ‘Bass Culture’: 1. Experience: There is an emphasis on history as experience, and on music being true to the experience. This is different than claiming that the music is true to objective facts or events. 2. Consciousness: He speaks of the consciousness of the people, and of the listener’s being invited into that consciousness. The sense of community is based on the possibility of a shared consciousness. 3. Feeling: He displays the belief that one can understand a culture through feeling and not just rationality. These three aspects all focus on how the individual experiences the music, and how this experience brings with it an insight into the Jamaican experience and consciousness.

It is important to remember that the emphasis on the Afro-Jamaican experience that Johnson writes about refer to the postcolonial context of Jamaican music. In Johnson’s article, society, which includes the postcolonial context, is something that cannot be solely understood intellectually. This is one of the reasons why Johnson argues that music is crucial

for understanding Jamaican culture, and why I argue that aesthetics, in the sense of sensual perception, has an important place in Johnson's politics.

4.4 Revolution in the bass

The title of Johnson's essay 'Jamaican rebel music' is telling because it immediately views music as something that is an important part of the Jamaican struggle, and not a distraction from it. Jamaica has a population of two million people, and has produced over 100,000 individual records from 1965 to 1990. Jamaica might be the country that has released the highest number of records per citizen (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, [1]). These numbers illustrate that music has an extraordinary position in Jamaican society and life. In comparison, only 70 collections of poetry were written by Jamaicans in the same period. Only 31 of these were published in Jamaica (Dawes, 1999, 77). These numbers add some perspective concerning why so many Jamaican poets are inspired by music as much as by literature, and therefore why I dedicate so much room to explain references to this context when I analyse Johnson's poems. Music is a crucial part of everyday life in Jamaica, and poets that write about everyday life will often incorporate music into their poetry.

The essay 'Jamaican rebel music' is about reggae music in general, and a considerable amount of reggae music does have overtly political lyrics. Social commentary is an important characteristic of much of the reggae Johnson mentions. This focus is not surprising, because political lyrics were especially prominent in reggae music of the late seventies, when this essay was written. Johnson writes 'Over the last decade, the main preoccupation of the lyricist has been the burning social, political and economic issues of the day' (Johnson, 1976, 411). This explicitly political content was especially a characteristic of 'roots reggae', a kind of reggae informed by Rastafarianism, with lyrics concerning the life of the ghetto sufferer, and the legacies of colonialism (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 129). However, the evolution of reggae music goes further back than the 'roots reggae' of the seventies, and reggae subgenres from the sixties, like ska and rocksteady, which often sang about love, dancing, and the trivialities of the everyday, are also addressed in the essay as an important part of the legacy of Jamaican rebel music. Johnson believes that reggae artists like Prince Buster and the duo Michigan and Smiley are also poets (Markham, 1989, 257). These artists cover a wide range of subject matters. One must remember that reggae lyricism is very

diverse, ranging from radical politics to slackness and everyday love stories.²⁵ Johnson's writing implies that it is not only the overtly political aspect that defines the rebellious nature of reggae: 'The lyricism of Jamaican music, which is a part of as well as being informed by the wider Jamaican oral tradition, gives poetic or lyrical expression to what the music expresses' (Johnson, 1976, 10). The lyrics express an experience that is already inherent in the music. Referring to professor of West-Indian literature Gordon Rohlehr, Johnson writes:

Rohlehr, the West Indian literary critic, has commented on the fierceness of the "forces of despair and erosion" that permeate Jamaican society and culture, and its relation to the music. "Each new weight of pressure" in the society, says Rohlehr, "has its corresponding effect on the music, and the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass, the basic rhythm, the inner pulse whose origin is in the confrontation between the despair which history and iniquitous politics inflict, and the rooted strength of the people" (Johnson, 1976, 401).

The formulation 'the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass' exemplifies what Johnson calls Jamaican rebel music. The music is rebellious not just because of the lyrics, but also because of the specific musicality of the music, here represented by the bass. The lyrics are important, but always in relationship with the bass and basic rhythm. Rohlehr points at the connection between bass and history/culture that we already have seen at work in Johnson's poetry, 'di beat will shif / as di culture alltah'. Bass channels the historical experience, and by experiencing the bass, one can get a feel of this experience. It is difficult to understand how Johnson and Rohlehr would explain this process empirically, but it is telling that they share the same rhetoric. They both discuss music as something more than information or documentation. Moreover, they both express that one is not necessarily able to understand Jamaican culture by reading statistics, facts, or events of colonial history alone. This also becomes evident in Johnson's explorations of dub and its relationship to history and society in his poems. With Johnson's, Rohlehr's, and King Jammy's rhetoric about music in mind, I think it becomes evident that musicality, and therefore the aesthetic, does play an important role in their depiction of the Jamaican postcolonial society. Johnson's interest in music and inspiration from reggae shows that the aesthetic in his poetry is not the same as the 'purity of medium' or the specificity of literarity. The aesthetic is not something intrinsic to the autonomy of literature, but a kind of experience people take part in through music and poetry in their everyday lives, without necessarily having any kind of conceptual knowledge about art.

²⁵ Slackness is Jamaican slang for sexually explicit content.

5 Defending the sound system: a postcolonial struggle

5.1 Frightful form: Violence and militancy

The phrase ‘frightful form’ that Johnson introduces in the poem ‘Bass Culture’ is interesting because it gives the aesthetic qualities of music and poetry a violent and aggressive potential. If we return to the end of ‘Dread Beat an Blood’, we see that the bass itself is not only an aggressive force against our individual bodies; it can also make people commit violent acts against each other. This violence has an ambiguous meaning. Is the interpersonal violence bad or is it ‘bad in a good way’ like the bass? The poem climaxes in the last stanza:

rocks rolling over hearts leaping wild,
rage rising out of the heat an the hurt
an a fist curled in anger reaches a her
then flash of a blade from another to a him
leaps out for a dig of a flesh of a piece of skin
an blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding (Johnson, 2006, 5).

The rage rises out of the ‘heat an the hurt’, which are caused or enhanced by the music, and ganja. Initially, the term ‘blood bitterness’ makes the violent attack appear grim and upsetting. However, the attack can also be read as a metaphor for the musical climax, which in that case gives the violence a positive meaning as a metaphor for the power of the bass. The violence in the poem can be read as something both negative and barbaric, and as a positive image of the music’s and poetry’s capacity to move people to action and rebellion. The bass has a violent potential that is both good and bad, and that makes violence especially ambiguous when the difference between aesthetic experience and violent confrontation is blurred in the poems.

As I have briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, the aesthetic experience of rhythm and bass can enhance a violent impulse in the listener. In the article ‘Jamaican rebel music’, Johnson addresses Jamaica’s violent colonial history, and why Jamaica is one of the most violent places on earth. He quotes Gordon Rohlehr, who writes, ‘When the rhythm goes dread, the whole society *feels* the tension, and why not? After all it was the cruel tension which determined that the beat should go dread in the first place’ (Rohlehr in Johnson, 1976, 401; emphasis in original). This is an example of perceiving the music as something that communicates and reflects historical experience. The music reflects a violent history, and the

listener feels this violent tension in the rhythm. Johnson writes about dub lyricism: ‘It is a lyricism which laments the human suffering, the terrible torments, the toil, a lyricism whose imagery is that of blood and fire, apocalyptic and dread – images that are really pictures of a brutal existence in the “land of Sodom and Gomorrah”’ (Johnson, 1976, 405). The imagery of ‘blood and fire’ is evident in ‘Dread Beat an Blood’, ‘Bass Culture’, ‘Reggae Sounds’, ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, and ‘All Wi Doin is Defendin’. Images of blood and bleeding occur in all these poems. This is another example of how the lyricism tries to express a form of violence, tension, and ‘dread’ that is already inherent in the rhythm and bass.

In analysing the poem ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, we see that this imagery of ‘blood and fire’ does not always have a cathartic effect, but can actually make the inner tensions surface and react. ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ is more narrative than the other poems I have analysed. The poem consists of six stanzas. The first stanza sets the tone in the poem with its opening ‘madness...madness... / madness tight on the heads of the rebels’ (Johnson, 2006, 6). The next five stanzas all describe a musical happening that ends in a violent attack. This is the poem in its entirety:

madness...madness...
madness tight on the heads of the rebels
the bitterness erupts like a hot-blast
broke glass
rituals of blood on the burning
served by a cruel in-fighting
five nights of horror an of bleeding
broke glass
cold blades as sharp as the eyes of hate
an the stabbings
it’s war amongst the rebels
madness...madness...war.

night number one was in brixton²⁶
soprano B sound system ²⁷
was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
coming down his reggae-reggae wire
it was soun shaking down your spinal column
a bad music tearing up your flesh
an the rebels them start a fighting
the yout them jus turn wild
it’s war amongst the rebels
madness...madness...war.

night number two at shephard’s
right up railton road

²⁶ BRIXTON, SOFRANO B, SHEPARD’S, RAILTON ROAD, NEVILLE KING’S, RAINBOW, JAMES BROWN, LEROY, and TELEGRAPH are capitalized in the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood*. Maybe Johnson or the editor decided that this capitalisation was overkill in the Penguin *Selected Poems* edition?

²⁷ Spelled ‘sofrano B,’ in the first edition. The sound system referred to probably had two names, and has been later most known as Soprano B.

it was a night named Friday
when everyone was high on brew
or drew a pound or two worth a kally
soun coming doun neville king's music iron
the rythm jus bubbling an back-firing
raging an rising, then suddenly the music cut
steel blade drinking blood in darkness
it's war amongst the rebels
madness ...madness...war.

night number three
over the river
right outside the rainbow
inside james brown was screaming soul
outside the rebels were freezing cold
babylonian tyrants descended
pounced on the brothers who were bold
so with a flick
of the wrist
a jab an a stab
the song of blade was sounded
the bile of oppression was vomited
an two policemen wounded
righteous righteous war.

night number four at a blues dance
a blues dance
two rooms packed an the pressure pushing up
hot. hot heads. ritual of blood in a blues dance
broke glass
splintering fire, axes, blades, brain-blast
rebellion rushing doun the wrong road
storm blowing doun the wrong tree
an leroj bleeds near death on the fourth night
in a blues dance.

on a black rebellious night
it's war amongst the rebels
madness...madness...war.

night number five at the telegraph
vengeance walked through the doors
so slow
so smooth
so tight an ripe an smash!
broke glass
a bottle finds a head
an the shell of the fire-hurt cracks
the victim feels fear
finds hands
holds knife
finds throat
o the stabbing an the bleeding an the blood
it's war amongst the rebels
madness...madness...war (Johnson, 2006, 6–8).

‘Beating out a rhythm with a fire’ illustrates the characteristic imagery of ‘blood and fire’, and how the tension and violence are inherent in the rhythm. The sound ‘shaking down your

spinal column' is yet another example of how bass is depicted as something physical. 'A bad music tearing up your flesh' shows how the bass violates and attacks the listener's organs. The use of the term 'bad music' reveals how bad can mean good, and that the bass's violence is a positive quality. However, in a similar manner as in 'Dread Beat an Blood', an actual fight occurs when the music reaches its climax. Johnson has written about music's capacity to trigger violence:

But it so happens that, at times, the catharsis does not come through dance, for the violence that the music carries is turned inwards and personalized, so that for no apparent reason, the dance halls and yards often explode into fratricidal violence and general pandemonium (Johnson, 1976, 401).

Johnson writes that in these cases the Deejay must calm down the audience and remind people that they are at a musical happening where they must behave. He calls the Deejay a 'musical peace keeper' (Johnson, 1976, 400). In the poem, there is no such peace keeper or didactic voice. Therefore, nothing in the poem passes any clear moral judgment on violence. 'War amongst the rebels' implies that the violence is among the people at the dance and not directed towards an external treat or the police. The last four lines of the fourth stanza give a different impression: the song of blades was sounded / the bile of oppression was vomited/ an two policemen wounded/ righteous righteous war (Johnson, 2006, 7). The 'song of blades' creates yet another image of music being a sharp, powerful, and violent object. The wounding of two policemen is described righteous war. The 'bile of oppression vomited' paints a picture of the oppressed having had enough, and externalizing the anger that has been building up over time. 'Righteous war' makes this violence appear legitimate.

Violence is depicted in many of Johnson's poems; there is a special emphasis on police brutality against black youth in Britain in the seventies and eighties, and violent acts of self-defence. The poem 'Street 66' describes a party that is interrupted by the police. 'All Wi Doin is Defendin' depicts a full-blown war between black youth and the police. The poem 'Sonny's Lettah' is about young man who writes a letter to his mother informing her that he has killed a policeman to defend his brother. There is a militant aspect to Johnson's writing that becomes evident in the portrayal of righteous war in 'Five Nights of Bleeding'. However, the poem is dedicated to Leroy Harris, a victim of internecine violence (Johnson, 2006, 6). This dedication gives the poem an ambiguous way of representing violence. Violence seems destructive when it is amongst black youth because the poem is dedicated to a victim of internecine violence. However, the violence is described as righteous when it is

directed towards the police. This righteousness is exemplified in ‘Time Come’. This is an excerpt from the last stanza, lines 33–42:

when yu jack me up gense di wall
I didnt bawl,
but I did warn yu.

now yu si fire burning in mi eye,
smell badness pan mi bret,
feel vialence, vialence,
burstin outta mi;
look out!
it too late now:
I did warn yu (Johnson, 2006, 24).

This is a situation where the victim of police harassment feels like he has reached a limit, where the violence has been building up and has started to burst out of him. The waning ‘look out!’ has a lot in common with ‘SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!’ in ‘Bass Culture’. Both make the narrator intimidating and create the impression that the narrator wants to frighten, or to be feared. In the latter example, music is forceful and frightening. In ‘look out!’ it is the actual physical violence of the people that is threatening. The reason why I compare these two lines is because the political militancy and righteous war one can see in ‘Time Come’ should be understood in relation to the aesthetic experience of music and poetry. Both are depicted as powerful forces against the status quo, which violently attacks. In Johnson’s poetry, the aesthetic, particularly the bass and rhythm, is militant in itself, maybe as much as a fist, brick, or blade.

Johnson, in his choice of words, tries to express a violence that is inspired and informed by the music’s violence. In the introduction to the first edition of *Dread Beat and Blood* from 1975, the poet Andrew Salkey creates an image of the relationship between weapons and words in Johnson’s poetry, when he writes that Johnson cuts through abstraction ‘with the ease of a hot knife slicing through lard’ (Salkey in Johnson, 1975, 7). Salkey’s formulation is interesting precisely because he addresses the ideal that words can be a kind of sharp blade, or weapon, an ideal that also is present in Johnson’s poems. In ‘All Wi Doin is Defendin’, Johnson writes about the fight against the semi-military British police unit. He describes the confrontation: ‘wi know dem cold like ice wid fear / an wi is fire!’ (Johnson, 2006, 12). If we consider that the beat in ‘Dread Beat an Blood’ is ‘pulsing fire burning’, then both the music and the militant people are described as dangerous and

frightening fire; that is, as forces that have the power to dramatically and violently change their surroundings and fight ‘ice’, the static and frozen situation.

The violence and what Rohlehr calls ‘tenseness’ is inherent in the rhythm, but can consequently trigger actual violent acts among people. As a parallelism to the badness of the bass, the violence on the street can be bad, or bad in the sense of good. The violence can be a righteous last resort against the police, but it can also cause gang warfare and madness amongst ‘the rebels’. The bass is unpredictable and represents a kind of anarchic madness. Because the violence also can be turned inwards, one cannot use the rhythm and bass to achieve a certain desired political outcome. However, the bass inherently moves people to act in some way or another, and therefore symbolizes the possibility of political change.

5.2 Aesthetic experience interrupted by the police

As mentioned, violent confrontation between black youth and the police is a recurring motif in Johnson’s poetry. In ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, the confrontation happens outside a James Brown concert at the Rainbow, a former music venue in Finsbury Park. The scenario of a joyous musical happening being interrupted by the police also appears in both ‘Street 66’ and ‘New Craas Massakah’. ‘Street 66’ opens with a description of people grooving steadily to the music, in a ‘mellow steady flow’. Following are the second and third stanzas of five stanzas:

no man would dance but leap an shake
dat shock tru feelin ripe;
shape dat soun tumblin down
makin movemnt ruff enough;
cause when di muzik met I taps,
I felt di sting, knew di shock,
yea had to do an ride di rock.

outta dis rock
shall come
a greenah riddim
even more dread
dan what
di breeze of glory bread.
vibratin violence
is how we move
rockin with green riddim
di drout
an dry root out (Johnson, 2006, 9).

The leaping and shaking illustrate how the music is very physical, and the bodily reaction to the music is gymnastic, free, and impulsive rather than rule based. The ‘shape’ of the sound

tumbling down creates an image of sounds being a special shape or form, a sensorium that has a physical presence in the room. The imagery of the sound tumbling down can be interpreted as a metaphor for when elements like voice and drums in a dub are removed or faded, leaving just the 'low' bass to be heard. When only the bass line remains, it feels like the music falls in the transition from full sound to isolated bass line. The movement to the music is rough, which shows that the music makes a physical impact that may be challenging, painful tense and violent. The music 'stings', and attacks your body. The sting is something that pierces you painfully, like a sting from a wasp or a scorpion. On the other hand, the sting is also a strong emotional reaction caused by the music. The sting is an example of how the music hurts pleurably. The roughness exemplified by the sting and the shock is positive because it asserts the music's power and strength, which in turn forces listeners to get up and move, 'an ride di rock'.

Out of this musical experience there will come a 'riddim even more dread', which points to how the violence in the music accelerates. This is an example of a description where the music builds up and becomes more energetic and powerful as the poem progresses. Like in 'Dread Beat an Blood' and 'Five Nights of Bleeding', the musical description becomes more intense from stanza to stanza, and the musical climax parallels the dramatic peak. The musical build-up ends in a violent attack in 'Street 66', as we also have seen in the two other poems. The rhythm's exaltation to 'even more dread' does not have any clear limit, and will at some point end in madness or violence. The description of the 'riddim even more dread' is also an example of the fact that the more heavy and 'bad' the music is, the better the music is. To a certain degree, the poems romanticize violence when the violence and dread inherent in the music are made into an aesthetic ideal, especially when the reader struggles to distinguish the musical description from the violent attack, and when the difference between the two is obscured.

In the fourth stanza, the festive atmosphere is further portrayed: 'di mitey poet I-Roy woz on di wire, / Western did a scank and each one lawf: / him feelin irie, dread I' (Johnson, 2006, 10). I-Roy is the name of a Jamaican deejay who toasted over dubs, and who was popular in the seventies. Calling I-Roy a 'mitey poet' is an important statement. I-Roy is a popular recording artist, not a writer. This is one point where it becomes evident that Johnson continuously engages in a discussion about the nature of poetry. He addresses the importance of acknowledging the poetic qualities of practices that are not usually defined as poetry. 'Irie' means good or feeling good, and describes the nice atmosphere and pleasant

feeling of the rough music. The fifth (and last) stanza of the poem introduces the sudden interruption of the joyful party by the police:

hours beat di scene movin rite
when all of a sudden
bam bam bam a knockin pan di door.
“Who’s dat?” asked Western feelin rite.
“Open up!” It’s the police! Open up!”
“What address do you want?”
“Number Sixty-six! Come on, open up!”
Western feelin high reply:
“Yes, dis is street 66;
step rite in an tek some licks” (Johnson, 2006, 10).

The scene ‘movin rite’ sets the tone. The party is filled with happy people dancing and grooving. This atmosphere is contrasted by the sudden grave situation that occurs when the police knock on the door. The people at the party are ready to defend themselves, and have been ready for a while, as the fourth stanza already has warned the reader that, ‘any policeman come yah / will get some righteous raas klaat licks, / yea man, whole heap a kicks’ (Johnson, 2006, 10). In this sense, the interruption by the police might not be a surprise. The people at the party expect conflict, and they are ready to defend themselves violently if necessary. They have anticipated the interruption and are prepared. The title of Johnson’s poem ‘All wi Doin is Defendin’ expresses a situation where black youth in Britain have to be ready to defend themselves, even at a party. This paints a picture of how politicized their everyday lives are. The door marks the line that separates the private sphere of musical enjoyment from the public sphere of racial politics and police. The poems portray how the private sphere is invaded by politics. Politics is literally knocking on the door in the poem. The people are at the party enjoying themselves and do not choose to engage in political questions. Politics are inflicted upon them by the interruption, whether they want to or not. The sociopolitical sphere represented by the police interrupts the aesthetic sphere represented by the musical event. In ‘Street 66’, the people have gathered to listen to I-Roy, in other words they have gathered to experience music and poetry, but they end up having to fight the police.

When they defend themselves against the police interruption, they also fight for the right to take part in this aesthetic sphere. In ‘All Wi Doin is Defendin’ Johnson writes, ‘all wi doin / is defendin / soh get yu ready / fi war...war... / freedom is a very firm thing’ (Johnson, 2006, 11). When the people fight the police in ‘Street 66’, there are several ways of interpreting what kind of freedom they are fighting for, because the poem does not give any clear answer to this question. Nevertheless I think it is useful to read ‘Street 66’ in light of

‘Want fi Goh Rave’. It is not only food and housing that people fight for. Both poems show that people also want the right to enjoy themselves with music and poetry in peace, without being victimized. In Johnson’s poetry, this right is constantly threatened by social and political forces like police discrimination. The aesthetic spheres of music and poetry are not separated from the sociopolitical context, because the context intervenes and imposes itself. This is exactly the problem of discrimination that becomes evident in ‘Street 66’. Black youths are stopped on the street, and the police shut down their musical happenings. They do not have the privilege to mind their own business and carry on. In this sense, discrimination prohibits them from stepping outside of sociopolitical issues. This becomes very clear when even their leisure time and enjoyment at the party are transformed into a political battleground.

5.3 Defending the sound system:

Defending aesthetic experience

A common motif in ‘Street 66’, ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, and ‘New Craas Massakah’ is that a musical event or party is interrupted by external political forces. In ‘New Craas Massakah’, young people dancing to and enjoying the music is a brutal contrast to the tragic political event that has gone into British history as ‘the ‘New Cross house fire’. Like in ‘Street 66’, one sees the evolution from a private joyful musical event to a disturbing political event when the house is attacked. The sound system creates a space and time that configure a specific aesthetic experience, and ‘Street 66’ and ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ show that this sphere is constantly threatened by police intervention.

Clinton Hutton, lecturer in political philosophy at The University of The West Indies, argues that the Jamaican sound system phenomenon that originated in the fifties was the rise of a new art form that had a global impact, especially on the rise of hip hop. In the article ‘Forging identity and community through aestheticism and entertainment: The sound system and the rise of the DJ’, published in *Caribbean Quarterly*, Clinton Hutton writes about the ‘sound system as art’ (Hutton, 2007, 17). Hutton’s notion of the sound system as art is interesting because it shows how the sound system can be analysed as an art form that configures a specific time and space, and a specific aesthetic experience. The sound system has played an important role in establishing musical styles like dub, but it has also established a specific kind of frame, a space, and time, in which one can perceive all kinds of music differently than one can at home. The sound system has influenced how Jamaican music is

made, but also the form in which people have been able to perceive music. Hutton's main argument is that the sound system played an important role in forging a Jamaican identity and community through 'aestheticism and entertainment'. This argument points at relationship between aesthetic experience and community, which can shed some light on the musical event as motif in Johnson's poetry. The parties in 'Street 66', 'Five Nights of Bleeding', and 'New Craas Massakah' represent an aesthetic space that plays an important role in retaining a Jamaican identity and community in London. In my reading of these three poems, this community is largely held together by a capacity to share musical and *a priori* aesthetic experiences like rhythm and bass. In the essay 'Jamaican rebel music', Johnson writes that the 'feel of music is the feel of their common history', and the linking of aesthetic experience and community is important in Johnson's poetry, and is interestingly examined in the concepts of 'bass culture' and 'bass history' that Johnson introduces. The musical experience is one way of retaining the community; the other sense of community comes from a shared experience of police brutality and racist politics intervening in everyday life. The poem 'New Craas Massakah' portrays how the positive collective experience of music can suddenly turn into a negative collective experience of racism.

5.4 Representing sensory and intellectual experience

In the poem 'New Craas Massakah', a joyful party in the Jamaican community evolves into a traumatic historical tragedy for that same community. The title 'New Craas Massakah' refers to a historical event. The New Cross Massacre, also referred to as the Deptford Fire, took place 18 January 1981. The fire was the result of a racially motivated arson attack on Yvonne Ruddock's sixteenth birthday party. The fire resulted in the deaths of 14 black youths, and injured 26 (Johnson, 2006, 54). The poem is dedicated 'to the memory of the fourteen dead' (Johnson, 2006, 54). Johnson's poetry explicitly comments on the racial tension in London, and addresses the political issues at the time. This rather narrative poem opens with:

first di comin
an di going
in an out af di pawty

di dubbin
an di rubbin
an di rackin to di riddim

di dancin
an di scankin
an di pawty really swingin

den di crash
an di bang
and di flames staat fi trang

di heat
an di smoke
an di people staat fi choke

di screamin
an di cryin
an di diein in di fyah...²⁸ (Johnson, 2006, 54).

For the reader who has read ‘Street 66’, ‘Bass Culture’, and ‘Dread Beat an Blood’, it is possible to recognize the opening scene as a characteristic way of establishing the mood in Johnson’s poetry: people enjoying the music, dancing and moving to the rhythm. The poem depicts a musical experience that evolves into a violent scene. There is a contrast between the harmonic opening and the brutal turn, which is also visible in many of the other poems. However, in this poem the violence does not evolve from within the group. The violence is a ‘crash’ and ‘bang’ that comes from outside.

The sense of community established through shared musical experience evolves into a sense of community established by a shared memory of a traumatic day. The musical opening appears as a calm before the storm, instead of escalating and building up to the violent climax. In ‘Dread Beat an Blood’, the interpersonal violence can be interpreted as good because the musical violence of the bass is good, and the difference between the two is not clearly drawn in the poem’s structure. In this poem, the music is not described as violent or bad, so it is less ambiguous and seems to come from nowhere. The poem clearly focuses on violence as an evil, and not a potentially good thing. Nevertheless the poem adds to the ambiguous position of violence in Johnson’s oeuvre when read next to ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, or ‘All We Doin is Defendin’, where violence can be justified. The excerpt shows that the party ends in a horrific attack.

In the following stanzas, the speaker reflects upon the reaction amongst the black community, and criticizes the police’s investigation. In between these critical stanzas, he repeats variations of the opening scene. In this way, the motif of the joyful party interrupted by the horrific violence is repeated three times in the poem. This repetition is unpleasant because it insists on confronting the reader with the tragedy of the scene repeatedly. Johnson oscillates between a critical and activist tone, and a more neutral sensory representation of the

²⁸ The word Fyah’ is spelled ‘fire’ in ‘Dread Beat an Blood’. It is possible that he uses a more distinctly Jamaican spelling to express a more urgent radical message in this poem that depicts a traumatic event. The more polarized the situation in London is in the poems, the more non-standard English forms are used.

attack. This shift creates a constant dialogue between the sensuous reaction to a particular poetic image, and the rational voice that has to analyse that image in a sociopolitical context. This narrative method says something about how Johnson inhabits the position of both poet and activist. He creates a poetic image that he repeats three times, which describes the sensuous experience of being in the house. In addition, there is an analytical voice running parallel, trying to intellectually grasp and contextualize the raw material of the scene: ‘Look how di police and di press / try dem despahret bes / fi put a stap to wi ques fi di trute’ (Johnson, 2006, 57). The activist voice argues that the police and press covered up the fact that the arson was racially motivated. Readers are forced to grasp the horrific event both intellectually and sensorily by imagining the sensory experience of being in that room: the music, the crash, the bang, the flames, and the pleasure that evolves into pain. The interesting question is why he repeats the scene so many times. Why is clearly stating the horror in the analytical stanzas not enough to get the message across? This is a case of trying to show and not only tell. Readers feel empathy not only because we conceptually understand the horror when someone tells us about it, but also because we can imagine the experience being our own. We can imagine a pleasurable musical experience turning into fear and pain. Johnson combines showing and telling so that the reader can imagine feeling the pain in the room and contextualise this pain. The narration presents the horrific event in the present tense, but analyses and discusses the event in the past tense. The reader oscillates between ‘now’ and ‘after’ the event, experiencing and understanding the indications of the experience. The poem makes readers identify with the experience of pain and fear, but it also forces readers to intellectually process this experience so that we have a means of preventing people from having similar experiences in the future.

5.5 Bass as postcolonial struggle

So far, I have argued that the sound system configures an aesthetic space, and that the heavy dub bass in the dub music creates a unique aesthetic experience. I have also analysed ‘Street 66’, ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, and Johnson’s tendency to portray musical events and parties being shut down by the police. In ‘New Craas Massakah’, the party is not shut down by the police, but is interrupted by a racially motivated attack. These clashes between musical events and external political forces create a relationship between musical events, understood as aesthetic experience, and the battle against racism, understood as postcolonial struggle. In these three poems, the aesthetic experience of the sound system is a form of postcolonial

resistance because the sound system is portrayed as a place that represents enjoyment, pride, and freedom, in contrast to the harassment, victimization, and domination in society.

In the article 'Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry and the Political Aesthetics of Carnival in Britain', Ashley Dawson writes about the poem 'Forces of Victory'. She argues that the poem re-enacts the black community's defeat of the police efforts to shut down the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976. There was a great deal of conflict between the Caribbean community and the police in the seventies because the police planned to take the annual Caribbean carnival off the streets. The carnival consisted of many different expressions: music, costumes, and dance. One important aspect of the carnival is that many different sound systems set up their speakers in the street. Johnson's engagement in the carnival movement can shed some light on how the sound system functions as a battleground in his poetry. The annual carnival and frequent sound system parties were recreational and musical events that the police were very determined to shut down. Ashley Dawson writes:

Indeed, the particularly synthetic quality of the carnival, which involved virtually every possible medium of creative expression, marks it as a central site for the formation of such a composite aesthetic. One source of the tensions surrounding the carnival was the failure, during the 1970's, of the British establishment to accept the validity of carnival as an art form (Dawson, 2006, 58).

The sound system is like the carnival, an art form, and a source of aesthetic experience that the Caribbean community had to violently defend. However, the establishment did not recognise the sound system as an esteemed form of art. Therefore, the police probably did not realise that they were blocking people's access to and participation in the aesthetic experience of art. The sound system and party are depicted as a space that represents a *human right* to art, recreation, and aesthetic enjoyment. The carnival movement shows how aesthetic experiences can be the objective of struggle, and not a distraction from it. The sound system does not represent distraction or escapism, but the bass itself is depicted as a form of resistance, a violent force that creates perceptible change and a reordering of time and place. These lines from 'Bass Culture' that I have repeated before clearly illustrate how the music and the sound system are depicted as resistance and not distraction: 'When di beat jus lash / when di wall mus smash / an di beat will shif / as de culture alltah / when oppression scatah' (Johnson, 2006, 16). The 'walls' may refer to the walls of Babylon in the context of reggae and dub music.²⁹ In the Rastafarian tradition in Jamaica, Babylon is the name of Western society, and what is understood as an exile from Africa. The quoted lines from 'Bass Culture'

²⁹ In the essay 'Jamaican rebel music', Johnson quotes the lyrics of the reggae song 'Beat Down Babylon' as an example of lyricism that attempts to fight oppression.

create an image of music, and of bass *itself* threatening the mechanism of oppression, and the limitations of society. Johnson's symbolism of bass as resistance considerably differs from the opposition between the aesthetic and the postcolonial that Boehmer maps in the passage also quoted in Chapter 2:

Insofar as the postcolonial can be taken to signify a political commitment to some form of struggle and as allied to the traditions of anti-colonial resistance (Young 2001), a simultaneous commitment to an aesthetic is understandably viewed in some postcolonial circles as a distraction, an unaffordable indulgence (Boehmer, 2010, 172).

The sound system and the aesthetic experience of music have an important place in Johnson's depiction of postcolonial resistance because the powerful and violent sounds are one of the most important weapons against 'the wall', the symbol of western oppression and control.

6 Rhythm and the everyday:

The sound ‘system’ beyond location

The most characteristic aspect of the sound system is not its specific geographic location, because the sound system is a mobile discotheque that can be moved anywhere. Aesthetic experience and dancing can therefore be absorbed into everyday activity. This becomes especially evident in the following portrayal of the Jamaican sound system culture:

It’s hard to conceive of a country where music plays a larger role in people’s lives than Jamaica. “Music drenched” one might call it, because it’s almost impossible to escape. Radios blare everywhere during the day. And at night, the tropical, open window style of life means almost every breeze carries the distant strains of some sound system through your house, no matter where you live (Chang and Chen, 1998, 175).

The sound system, and the aesthetic experience of music, is ultimately something that transcends institutions and that is integrated in life. It may in fact be a *way* of life. In this chapter I will look at how the sound system is not only a location in the poems, but also an alternative ‘system’ configured by bass and rhythm that is integrated in life and that challenges the ‘system’ of domination and oppression that the police represents.

6.1 More Time: The importance of leisure

As I have argued, the sound system functions as a place of both leisure and resistance in the poems. Leisure becomes a political act of resistance because it represents freedom. The poem ‘More Time’ formulates the importance of spare time. This excerpt shows stanzas two and three, of all together five.

wi want di shatah workin day
gi wi di shatah workin week
langah holiday
we need decent pay

more time fi leasure
more time fi pleasure
more time fi edificaeshun
more time fi reckreashan
more time fi contemplate
more time fi ruminare
more time fi relate (Johnson, 2006, 86).

The first stanza opens with a rather predictable portrayal of the worker as someone who engages in workers’ rights, fighting for more pay and a shorter working day. Nevertheless,

the emphasis on more pay is quickly overshadowed by the request for more time for leisure and enjoyment. Better rights for workers are a means to achieve other personal aspirations. This poem also shows that there is not necessarily an opposition between struggle and leisure, because leisure becomes the purpose of struggle. One struggles for the right to indulge: ‘more time fi meditate / more time fi create /more time fi life’ (Johnson, 2006, 87). The constant interruption of the sound system party shows that this is not a right one has automatically.

The poem is about working conditions, but shows how leisure and recreation are important parts of that struggle. The right to leisure becomes even more important in a political context in London in the seventies where black men were criminalized when they were hanging around doing nothing and listening to music. Doing nothing of importance seemed to attract more suspicion from the police than being at work. This is depicted in the poem ‘Yout Scene’, where Johnson describes a Saturday in Brixton. The men are standing outside of a record shop, Desmonds’s Hip City. This is a reference to a real record shop that sold reggae records in London in the seventies. The men stand outside of the shop: ‘soakin in di sweet musical beat’ (Johnson, 2006, 3). However, when the night comes the police hunt them down and beat them up. The poem does not claim that these men are innocent; they pick pockets and hit their women, but he writes that ‘dem naw rab bank’ (Johnson, 2006, 3). He implies that they might not be saints; however, the police violence is exaggerated. The record shop and the sound system represent leisure, fun, and freedom, but are constantly threatened by suspicion and intervention. Johnson was very engaged in fighting the suspicion and harassment many black men felt from the police in the seventies. Johnson portrays the importance of leisure time on two levels, as ‘time off’ from work and as ‘time off’ from having to constantly defend yourself against the police. They both represent duty. The record shop, the sound system, and the carnival are leisure time that is closely linked to freedom, because they represent active will rather than obligation.

6.2 Skanking down the street:

Rhythm and style integrated in everyday life

Many of Johnson’s poems depict everyday life and street culture in Brixton, a neighbourhood in London with many Jamaican immigrants. Walking down the streets of Brixton is an activity that is found in the opening of several of Johnson’s poems, especially those from the seventies. ‘Yout Scene’ opens with ‘last satdey / I nevah deh pan no faam, / so I decide fi tek a walk / doun a Brixton’ (Johnson, 2006, 3). ‘Double Scank’ opens with ‘I woz jus about fi

move fahwod, / tek a walk tru di markit' (Johnson, 2006, 4). Walking establishes a local and everyday atmosphere because the places he walks to appears to be on his daily route down the road or to the market. 'Yout Scene' and 'Double Scank' were initially a part of a personal experiment Johnson called 'Notes on Brixton' (Markham, 1989, 252). The poem 'Want fi Goh Rave' most interestingly depicts the role of aesthetic experience in everyday life in Brixton. Consistent with the other poems mentioned, it opens with a stanza that consists of a walking scene. An encounter with a male youth takes place when the speaker is walking down the road:

I woz
waakin doun di road
di adah day
when I hear a likkle yout-man say³⁰

him seh:
yu noh si mi situation
mi dont have noh acamadaeshan
mi haffi sign awn at di stayshon
at six in di evenin
mi seh mi life gat noh meanin
I just livin widout feelin

still
mi haffi make a raze
kaw mi come of age
an mi want fi goh rave³¹

I woz
waakin doun di road
anadah day
when I hear anadah yout-man say

him seh:
mi naw wok fi noh pittance
mi naw draw dem assistance
mi use to run a likkle rackit

but wha, di police them di stap it
an I had woz to hap it

still
mi haffi mek a raze
kaw mi come of age
an mi want fi goh rave

I woz
waakin doun di road
yet anadah day
wen I hear anadah yout-man say

him seh;
mi haffi pick a packit
tek a wallit fram a jackit
mi fhaffi dhu it real crabit
an if a lackit mi haffi crack it
ar chap it wid mi hatchit
but
mi haffi mek a raze
kaw mi come of age
an mi wan fi goh rave (Johnson, 2006, 33–34).

The phrasing 'di adah day' creates the impression of the events taking place recent to the narration and creates a colloquial image of the speaker retelling something that happened on a normal day. Walking also has a similar movement and rhythm to that of 'skanking'. Skanking is a dance style that was popularized in the early seventies, and which fits the reggae rhythm, particularly the drum and bass part (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 378). The dance style looks like you are simulating the movement of walking, but remaining at the

³⁰ Likkle means little.

³¹ To rave means to party.

same place with your arms and feet moving to rhythm. It is difficult to read the poem without skanking coming to mind. On the album version of the poem, you can hear a typical skanking reggae rhythm in the background of the lyrics. If you look at video footage of the poems performed with a band, the band is actually skanking behind Johnson on stage. The similarity between skanking and walking in the poem becomes obvious when you look at the video footage. Yet, there is also a similarity between walking and skanking when you isolate the printed version of the poem.

In 'Want fi Goh Rave', the walking stanza at the beginning of the poem is repeated three times. The feeling of the speaker skanking is established by the repetition of the walking scene. The poem's structure is created by the interaction between walking, encounter, walking, encounter, walking, and encounter. The repetition creates a feeling of the speaker walking through the poem. However, the speaker does not inform the reader where he is going or why he is walking, and the repetition of the exact same stanza gives the impression of walking without getting anywhere. The walking becomes like a continuing movement rather than an instrument for transportation. In this sense, the walking has the same function as skanking in the poem. It is a repetition of movement, without any clear purpose apart from keeping a rhythm. The walking therefore becomes dance-like. The walking integrates elements of rhythm and dance into walking down the road. In other words, music and rhythm are integrated in everyday life, and the difference between the dance floor and the street, the aesthetic realm and the ordinary, is blurred in the poem.

The sound systems were often located in neighbourhoods, on beaches, or on streets. There was therefore no absolute divide between the sound system and street life, especially not in a community like Brixton where record shops and sound systems played music that one could hear outside. This shows how the sound system is not only a specific geographic location, but also a culture or 'system' that is integrated in life. The walking/skanking around, just being cool, creates a contrast to the involuntary work situation described in 'More Time'. In many ways, the youth in the poems behave as if they were at a sound system, when they are actually in the everyday realm. They obey the rules and codes of the sound systems, rather than the norms of English society. Walking becomes an activity that readers associate with the sound system, spare time, and leisure because of its dance-like and dandy demeanour. Walking seems more like a playful activity than a kind of work.

In the poem 'Yout Scene', there are depictions of young men walking around in Brixton in the coolest fashion and hanging around outside of records shops. This activity has an aspect of 'dandyism' to it. The dandyism also becomes evident in the 'Double Scank':

‘when I site breddah Buzza / bappin in style / comin doun FRONT LINE’ (Johnson, 2006, 4). This is an example of how there is an emphasis on stylishness and coolness in Johnson’s earliest poems. This emphasis refers to the very style-aware aspect of reggae culture that was especially prominent in the ‘rude boy’ era. The slang term ‘rude boy’ refers to a subculture of young ghetto criminals in the sixties in Jamaica that dressed in sharp suits and stylish clothing, and had a passion for Clarks shoes (Barrow and Dalton, 1997, 377).³² The important reggae producer, Derek Harriot, has described the stylish atmosphere at the first sound systems in Jamaica:

The people would have on their best clothes – when it comes to dressing up no one can look fine like the ghetto people – and you would have a drink or whatever and hear the very best music. It made us feel real good about ourselves. Like we could do anything (Bradley, 2000, 3–4).

Harriot’s description shows that poor Jamaicans from the ghetto prioritised indulgences like music and fashion. Music and style represented a feeling of pride and freedom. Johnson’s poems give insight into how this mentality of the sound system culture can be observed on the streets of Brixton, and can be integrated into everyday life. The walking/skanking around and the stylish clothing both represent the leisure associated with the sound system, in contrast to the duty of work. ‘Want fi Goh Rave’ asserts how many of the characters in Johnson’s poems prioritise and aspire towards leisure and so called ‘indulgence’ even though they struggle economically.

6.3 Time for rave: aesthetics perceived as a human right

When the speaker in ‘Want fi Goh Rave’ walks down the street, he encounters young men who complain about their life and social situation. The first encounter is described as meeting ‘a yout-man’. The encounters are described as meeting ‘anadah yout-man’, which implies that the speaker encounters different men. The men want to ‘mek a raze’, which means to get money. They want money so they can ‘goh rave’, which means to go to a party or dance. In the historical context and in the context of the other poems, this party is probably at a sound system. The first youth complains about his social insecurity and meaningless life, but he surprisingly needs money for partying and not for housing or food. The last youth says that he has to rob people to get money. Both youths use the words ‘haffi mek a raze’, which means ‘have to get money’. The use of ‘haffi’ presents the rave as a human right. The last

³² A design/cultural history book called *Clarks in Jamaica* was published by One Love Books in 2012. This book exemplifies how important fashion has been in the Jamaican reggae culture. The shoe brand has its own cultural history on the island, and many reggae lyrics, past and current, refer to the infamous shoe.

man feels that he has no other choice than criminality, and he ‘haffi dhu it real crabit’, which means greedily. Usually when people refer to criminality as the last way out, it is justified by hunger and not by the quest for music and dancing. The men might use moral or immoral means, but they ultimately want time and money to enjoy music. In other words, aesthetic enjoyment is the purpose of their struggle. The poem is an unconventional portrayal of struggle and poverty. When the men complain about their situation, they do not express that they need money for food or what is usually defined as basic needs. One could question whether partying should be considered vital to living, but it is for these characters regardless. The poem portrays how what someone would call vanity or indulgence can be an elementary need in another person’s life. The expectation that people who have an unfortunate situation or deprived situation will not prioritise aesthetics is challenged by these characters’ quest for going to a sound system.

In Chapter 2, I referred to Elleke Boehmer, who argues that aesthetics is perceived as an unaffordable indulgence and distraction from postcolonial resistance and struggle. ‘Want fi Goh Rave’ offers a different perspective. The poem shows how aesthetic experience functions not as a distraction from, but as a part of postcolonial struggle. The youths in the poem are like any other youths. They are interested in listening to music, dancing, and having a good time. If one considers Boehmer’s statement about aesthetics being an indulgence, then the characters in the poem are not behaving as they are expected to. They are not behaving as poor oppressed people should according to this definition of struggle. However, the poem shows that the characters are not obligated to desire certain things just because they are unfortunate. Should not those who struggle define what the struggle is? By desiring something other than what the reader might expect, the characters become more than people who deserve our pity and who exemplify a sociocultural problem. They become subjects with individual will who may or may not act in accordance with the readers’ morals, priorities, or judgments. The characters express personal motivations that might not solve any obvious social problem, and they are not defined as individual only by their problems in the poem. Partying becomes the cause of the struggle in the poem, and this forces the reader to rethink what postcolonial struggle is and what the distraction and indulgence from it might be. In my readings of the poems, I have shown that aesthetic experience has an important role in Johnson’s depiction of postcolonial struggle. On these grounds, I will discuss how criticism that fears that aesthetics will interfere with the political message in Johnson’s poetry is not applying a suitable theoretical framework to the poems.

7 The reggae literary form

In the previous four chapters of the thesis, I have analysed a selection of poems and examined the relationship between postcolonial resistance and aesthetic experience in Johnson's poetry. In chapter seven and eight, I will discuss how Johnson's poetry challenges the traditional opposition between postcolonial literature and aesthetics that Elleke Boehmer presents in the seminal article 'A postcolonial aesthetic: repeating upon the present'. I will discuss how a theoretical framework that defines aesthetics as an indulgence or distraction from postcolonial struggle is not applicable to Johnson's work, that is, how this framework is not in accordance with how this relationship is depicted in his poetry, or in the reggae tradition it is heavily influenced by.

The fear Emily Taylor Merriman expresses in her article 'Wi Nah Tek no More a Dem Oppression', that the relaxed enjoyment of music can reduce the mindful resistance, is not a concern present in the poetry and is consequently not a theoretical framework compatible with the poems. I will propose a different theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Johnson's work. If the poetry proposes a critical idiom, it is rather the merging of aesthetics and politics. How can the reggae tradition offer some new critical idioms to define the relationship between aesthetics and politics in poetry? Poet and professor of English, Kwame Dawes, has tried to define the main characteristics of a reggae aesthetic in *Natural Mysticism: Towards a new reggae aesthetic in Caribbean writing*:

It is central to reggae's form: a seductive, danceable and seemingly benign form that carries a deadly and deeply serious articulation of truth and meaning. Reggae believes in the entertainment value of art, but it does not create a dichotomy between entertainment and social or political commentary. This quality is crucial to the formal character of the music and consequently to the reggae aesthetic (Dawes, 1999, 112).

Insofar as Johnson's poetry is influenced by reggae music and there is a reggae aesthetic that inspires his form of writing, which is beyond doubt, one should not address aesthetics as a distraction from the political resistance in his work. Dawes argues that reggae is an important source of inspiration for many Caribbean writers and that critics underestimate the impact reggae has had on writing from the region. He also argues that the reception of dub poetry has had a reductive view of what reggae aesthetics may entail and the kind of literature it can inspire.

Reggae offers many critical idioms; I will try to outline some of them. Instead of positioning postcolonial literature as something antithetical to ‘Western’ aesthetics, one should examine more closely how postcolonial writing, along with many other events in the twentieth century, has contributed to expanding our definitions of poetry and aesthetics. Johnson’s poetry can be used to criticize the postcolonial criticism that has been sceptical towards approaching aesthetics. This critical praxis affirms some of the ways of defining literature that his poetry challenges.

7.1 A dubwise view of poetry

In the following chapter, I will discuss what kind of view of literature dub poetry expresses, and what literary concepts the form may offer literary study.

Many dub poets have expressed the will to challenge the elitism of academic discourse, emphasizing colloquial language and the philosophical and poetic qualities of common speech. Dub poetry has a democratic poetic ideal in the sense that no topic, no language, and no life are too ‘low’ for poetry. Dub poetry also challenges the hierarchy between the oral and the written, literature and performance. The genre therefore represents a particular view of both literary content and literary form. As I have argued, music and poetry are depicted as a form of resistance in itself and Johnson therefore challenges the idea of aesthetic experience being a distraction from struggle.³³ I will try to elaborate on how Johnson’s choice of literary themes and devices expresses a view of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in literature.

Firstly, music and poetry are portrayed as unique sensoriums, and the aesthetic experience is described as an autonomous form of experience. However, this is not the same as claiming that poetry is autonomous. Boehmer argues that there is a necessary link between autonomous literature and literature that has aesthetic qualities. Literature that tries to represent real-life situations or that is written in reaction to political situations is not autonomous, and therefore not as aesthetic as the self-contained work. I argue that aesthetic qualities of literature should be understood as something else than the hierarchy of abstraction over detailed and straight forward representation when we read dub poetry.

Johnson is not a representative of the classic medium specific formalism. He has worked with music and poetry, and has explored how mediums can inform each other, for

³³ As the lyrical/verbal, according to Johnson, tries to express what is inherent in music, his poetry tries to convey the resistance and violence that is found in bass music. I have illustrated this by looking at Johnson’s use of capital letters, alliteration, and the exclamation mark.

instance, how a written poem can channel music, and how music can channel poetry. He has been interested in how poetry functions in relation to other forms of art. His use of Jamaican Creole also inherently problematizes the difference between literature and the everyday use of language, and brings attention to literature's relationship to common speech, rather than to the medium-specific qualities of literature. Johnson experiments with how ideas and messages are shaped by their medium, but at the same time there is an artistic vision or essence that is somewhat generic and conceptual, rather than medium specific. However, as I have mentioned in Chapter 3, he does not want to dissolve the medium categories and he has emphasised that there needs to remain a difference between music and literature. Johnson does not seem to believe in a complete melange of the two. Literature is therefore something both autonomous and heteronomous in Johnson's poetics. Literature is a separate art form that is in conversation with other art forms, but it is also in conversation with life itself. Since music is a part of life in the poetry, it is difficult to distinguish literature's autonomy in relationship to other art forms, from literature autonomy in relation to life itself. The most important thing is that he puts the boundaries between literature and music, literature and life, into play, without rejecting that these boundaries should exist. Johnson's attempt to join literature and life differs from the historical avant-garde's precisely because he does not attack the idea of art being a separate institution in society. He does not argue that art should be dissolved *into* life. He is more interested in the conversation between art *and* life. Johnson is therefore a good example of what Shiner calls a 'third system of art' because he attempts to challenge the institutionalised division of autonomous and heteronomous without reversing the polarity.

The poems often straightforwardly depict the struggle against racism in Britain, and include references to real events, people, and places. Some of his poems are even dedicated to victims of racism, which does create a connection between the poems and a specific political context. Johnson's poetry includes straightforward representation of both political situations and elements that appear without any clear message. Hence, Johnson's poems combine explicit political representation with elements of abstraction. There is no hierarchy between abstraction and representation in the poetry, and the fact that they coexist is important, even though the straightforward political representation gets more attention by critics. In this sense, the individual poems often balance literary qualities associated with autonomy with literary qualities associated with activism and utility. But however one chooses to read the poems, there are elements that refer to a reality and to

specific political situations. Many elements of the poems situate literature in a special relationship to social reality.

7.2 Dub poetry's reference to the real

In Boehmer's article, it is the unavoidable reference to 'the real world out there separate from the artifact' and to 'the real-world reference' that makes a postcolonial aesthetic problematic (Boehmer, 2010, 170–171). This is an example of an argument where Boehmer herself displays a way of thinking that I believe retains the opposition between the aesthetic and the postcolonial. She does this by arguing that the real world references in postcolonial literature interfere with the aesthetic qualities of the writing. Alternatively, what if it is the close relationship between the literary text and the real world that characterizes an aesthetic definition of literature? The French philosopher Jacques Rancière offers an interesting perspective by introducing what he calls the 'aesthetic regime of art'. Rancière argues against the understanding of modernism that promotes the idea that abstraction is more aesthetic than figurative representation, or that literature is aesthetic because of the 'purity of its signifying materiality', instead of its close relationship to common speech acts (Rancière, 2011, 13). Rancière is interesting in a postcolonial context because he challenges many of the dichotomies that underlay the perceived opposition between aesthetics and postcolonial literature.

When Boehmer discusses the aesthetic aspect of literature, she seems to postulate that there are some literary topics that are inherently more aesthetic than others. The real world and real politics are not perceived as aesthetic topics, and there is a type of 'autonomous' literature that is aesthetic and a type of utilitarian or heteronomous literature that is not. This is in praxis what Shiner calls 'art divided' and the idea that there are aesthetic forms of art, and forms of art that are primarily craft. How can one think outside what Shiner calls 'art divided' and the opposition of 'art for art's sake' and art in the service of politics or mere entertainment? Rancière offers an alternative way of seeing this relationship.

The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between the forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art's sake and art in service of politics, museum art and street art. For aesthetic autonomy is not the autonomy of artistic "making" celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience (Rancière, 2009, 32).

Rancière offers an alternative by introducing the term 'the aesthetic regime of art', which is a system for identifying or defining what art is. The aesthetic regime of art breaks with the

‘representative regime of art’, which identifies art with specific forms: genres, objects, themes, motifs, and techniques. In the aesthetic regime, aesthetics is defined as an autonomous form of sensory experience, and not as the autonomy of artistic making. The aesthetic way of perceiving art implies that art is not defined by a certain subject matter, style, or content. Rancière can therefore challenge the link Boehmer draws between certain literary topics and the aesthetic qualities of literature. He argues that there is no hierarchy between figuration and abstraction in the aesthetic regime of literature. He writes that art of the aesthetic age ‘abolishes the boundaries that distinguished art objects from other objects in the world’ (Rancière, 2009, 101). In this definition of the aesthetic, it makes no sense to speak of a predefined set of aesthetic and non-aesthetic topics, or of a predefined relationship between art and non-art in literature. This is a dynamic process.

Shiner argues that the main characteristic of contemporary art practices (here defined as art after 1970) is that the boundary between art and life is constantly challenged. There is no absolute separation between art objects and every other object in the world. Shiner and Rancière address the same evolution in art, in which art is no longer fundamentally separate from non-art and where the aesthetic is defined by how something is apprehended, not what it is. Shiner and Rancière show that attempts to find new ways to understand the relationship between art and life, or art and politics, are not particularly a postcolonial concern. Contemporary art may even be characterized by this discussion and problem according to Shiner. I believe that contemporary aesthetic theory offers perspectives that are useful to the postcolonial field. Postcolonial critics should not discuss these topics in isolation from the general developments in aesthetic theory. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to convince others that the problems one encounters when aligning ‘the aesthetic’ with ‘the postcolonial’ are *necessary* problems, and that one is not in reality practicing what Rancière would call one regime and what Shiner would call one system of art.

7.3 Dub literarity

Elleke Boehmer claims that often the explicit political engagement of postcolonial authors makes it difficult to speak of the purely aesthetic qualities of their work. She writes:

To generalize for the sake of the argument, openly political, postcolonial work undertakes, without apology, to be ends-directed, programmatic, instrumentalist, didactic, intent on direct impact. It is dedicated, in the words of postcolonial critic Benita Parry, to ‘reclaiming community from the fragmentation and denigration attendant on colonialism’ (2004: 10). It is tasked with reconstitution. It is therefore very far from being preoccupied with an aesthetic (Boehmer, 2010, 172).

Firstly, this implies that the author's intention decides whether something is aesthetic, and not how the works are perceived or what kind of effect the works have on readers. Intention and effect may correlate, but not necessarily. Secondly, Boehmer's quote also exemplifies what Shiner calls the separation of fine art and craft, aesthetic art and utilitarian art. If a work of art is created with a political 'instrumental' purpose, it is not 'preoccupied' with an aesthetic, and should not be assessed as 'aesthetic art'.

Rancière stresses that literature has a special place in the aesthetic regime of art. According to Rancière, the emergence of the realist novel in the eighteenth century as something distinct from *belles-lettres* motivated the shift from the representative regime to the aesthetic regime of art (Rancière, 2004, 5).³⁴ I see similarities between this turn in the nineteenth century and what Shiner describes as the current development from *fine art* to just *art*. Art now refers less to certain subject matters or objects, and has become a term that may include any subject matter or practice. Johnson's poems express a similar view of poetry in the sense that there is no life, object, subject, style, or language too prosaic for poetry. He uses a language not considered poetic and depicts a life not considered poetic, and argues that they have a place in poetry. This process is in practice an attempt to expand our definition of poetry and to challenge the hierarchy of styles and subject matters in literature.

Rancière defines literarity in a very different way than the structuralists do. For Rancière, 'literarity' is the opposite from the structuralist vision of 'language restored to the purity of its signifying materiality' (Rancière, 2011, 13). Literature has specific qualities, but it is simultaneously indistinguishable from the act of speech. Literature also puts the relationship between the transitivity and intransitivity of language into play. The paradoxical absence of any specific boundaries between art and non-art is inherent in Rancière's definition of literarity, and literature therefore creates a unique dialogue between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art (Rancière, 2011, 13).

Johnson shows that poetry is a distinct and specific mode of representation, with other qualities than music. In addition, poetry has a special capacity to depict other modes of being and other aspects of life. Rancière's definition of literarity is therefore a suitable theoretical framework to analyse Johnson's poetry. His poetry is characterized by emphasizing the inclusiveness of literature exactly because it can grab hold of and integrate any topic and any aspect of life. I argue that the reggae tradition's wide range of lyrical themes inspires this inclusive view of literature.

³⁴ Rancière considers Balzac an important representative of realism, and the emergence of the aesthetic regime. He also uses Flaubert as an example of realism, even though this is more problematic.

I briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 that ‘roots’ reggae, which has the most overtly socially conscious lyrics, is just one aspect of reggae lyricism. Kwame Dawes argues that reggae lyricism is extremely diverse:

The range of genres within the reggae lyric is, indeed, almost limitless, including for instance, the praise poem, the warrior poem, the exhortation poem, the social commentary poem, the insult poem, the boasting poem, the blues lamentation, the celebration of music, the dance instruction piece, and the lesson in history (Dawes, 1999, 116).

In addition to the genres Dawes mentions, there is a vast number of lyrics consisting of sexual euphemisms and very explicit sex. Reggae lyrics have always reflected what people are interested in no matter how commonplace or trivial it is. Dawes also makes a relevant point about reggae’s inclusiveness and adaptability when he writes that reggae has a capacity to draw from other musical forms without compromising its character (Dawes, 1999, 110). When looking into the thousands of reggae titles, it does seem as if there is a song dedicated to every feeling or topic, and it becomes evident that reggae presents a non-hierarchical view of topics and themes. The most profane often figures in the same song as the most spiritual or metaphysical. The fact that Johnson’s poetry includes and combines history, musical celebration, love, political commentary, boasting, praise, warrior sensibilities, love, and humour is likely inspired by this tradition. The dub poetry critic Christian Habekost fails to acknowledge that the reggae aesthetic does not have a hierarchical logic of themes when he argues that the swan song is a betrayal of the reggae form, and when he makes the reggae lyric synonymous with the political commentary of ‘The Internationale’.

7.4 The selective critical reading of dub poetry

In Chapter 2, I quoted Shiner who writes, ‘The literary version of the art-versus-craft polarity is the division between an autonomous “literature” appreciated for itself and “mere writing” aimed at ordinary pleasure or utility’ (Shiner, 2001, 284). Johnson’s writing should be understood as an attempt to work outside of this system of literature. Johnson writes about everyday life in Brixton, politics, and music in a straightforward way that challenges the idea of ‘Literature’ (with a big ‘L’) as something drastically separated from ‘mere writing’ or ordinary speech.

Both Shiner and Rancière argue that the idea that a work of art needs to be abstract, or anti-representational, to be aesthetic has been challenged by the notion that everything can be called art, and therefore presented and perceived as an aesthetic object. Shiner and many

other historians have pointed out that the most important characteristic of art since the seventies, despite the period's pluralism, has been attempts to 'reintegrate art with life, from the intimately personal to the broadly political' (Shiner, 2001, 269). If one accepts that this is a characteristic of art in this period, then arguing that there is a conflict between political or historical engagement and aesthetics in postcolonial writing seems odd unless one argues that the same conflict exists in a vast section of contemporary literature and art generally. Why does the (potential) conflict between the aesthetic and the political then seem more urgent in the case of postcolonial literary criticism? Why is postcolonial literature forced to confront a problem that many other types of literature do not have to answer for as much? As mentioned in Chapter 2, Shalini Puri argues that there is something close to a 'fetishization' of resistance present in the reception of dub poetry, and in much Caribbean cultural study. Could it be that scholars working with postcolonial literature are more determined to promote a *specific* kind of resistance than other literary critics are? Not just any kind of resistance, but resistance that fits into a *predefined* project and worldview? This might seem reasonable if postcolonial literature is a part of a global anti-colonial movement, as the influential postcolonial critic Robert C. J. Young suggests. However, in my readings I have tried to explain how the sound system and the right to engage in the aesthetic experience of music are thematically depicted as an important cause of postcolonial struggle in London. I have tried to show that those who are labelled postcolonial subjects constantly reshape the meaning and the target of resistance. Postcolonial poets redefine what resistance means to them, at different times and in different situations, from page to page. To gain real insight into the postcolonial experience or life situation, you must acknowledge that this life is as dynamic, complex, and organic as any other life. This life might not always be capable of exemplifying an all-embracing system or ideology.

The reggae tradition shows us that poor or oppressed people care not only about poverty or misery. Life is built up of many different elements, and poetry has a special capacity to reflect this diversity. In my reading, I have shown how the sound system and the right to engage in the aesthetic experience of music are depicted as an important cause of postcolonial struggle in Brixton. In this case, arguing that aesthetics and postcolonial resistance are opposites becomes a paradox. I believe that postcolonial criticism that dismisses aesthetics risks echoing aspects of my interpretation of the police's role in the poems. Both refuses Caribbean people 'time off' from a predefined identity and role, and prevents them from participation in leisure, pleasure, and the aesthetic experience of art. Consequently, they obstruct the political resistance that these activities can generate.

7.5 The sound *system* as politics vs the police

Jacques Rancière distinguishes between politics and *the police order*. The police order is an organizational system or logic that establishes a *distribution of the sensible*, which is the law that divides the community into groups, functions, and positions. According to Rancière, politics takes place when these positions or functions are modified. *The political* is therefore fundamentally relational and dynamic. The political is an intervention in the police order, rather than a specific governmental regime: ‘Moreover, politics in its strict sense never presupposes a reified subject or predefined group of individuals such as the proletariat, the poor, or minorities’ (Rancière, 2004, 3). Politics is not defined as a predefined programme, ideology, or interest group. Politics is rather the process of challenging or ‘redistributing’ people’s allocated position or function in society. Rancière’s definition of politics can shed some light on how the sound system becomes a site of political resistance in Johnson’s poetry.

There is a similarity between the constant police interruption at the musical events and what Rancière calls *the police order*. In Johnson’s poetry, the police represent more than just the police force of civil servants. The police represent the general racism and victimization that are directed towards black people in Britain. The police represent the law that divides the community into groups, functions, and positions and that governs that individuals remain within these groups and act or speak according to their allocated group. When black men are arrested or stopped in the streets, they are forced to defend themselves, and they are automatically forced into the role of victim. When the characters hang around outside the record shop Desmond’s Hip City, they are initially individuals doing whatever they please, but when the police stop them, they automatically become ‘black men’ and are profiled accordingly. Rancière’s definition of the police order is not to be confused with the low-level police force that the term commonly refers to in English.

“*La basse police*” is only one particular instantiation of an overall distribution of the sensible that purports to provide a totalizing account of the population by assigning everyone a title and a role in the social edifice. The essence of the police order is therefore not repression but rather a distribution of the sensible that precludes the emergence of politics’ (Rancière, 2004, 89).

I am fully aware that Rancière defines the police order as a more abstract organization than that of police officers on patrol. However, Johnson’s poetry depicts how *la basse police* is exactly ‘one particular’ instantiation of the distribution of the sensible, and how this abstract

concept does coincide with concrete and practical relations in everyday life.

Johnson's poetry shows that the police is not an isolated repressive organ, but an institution that enforces a consensus about what is appropriate, and enforces expected ways of doing and saying by different people, where race functions as a central means of categorization and profiling. However, many of the people that are stopped by the police are criminals and many of them are not depicted as innocent. Johnson's poetry combines depictions of innocent victims and petty criminals. The men in 'Yout Scene' pick pockets while the boy in 'Sonny's Lettah' appears as a completely innocent victim. In this respect, black men are not at all depicted as a heterogeneous group. Far from all the men that the police stop are innocent, but that is of minor importance in the poems. The most important aspect is that the police do not initially distinguish between innocent and criminal, and therefore people that might have very little in common become a unified group. This is also an example of how the black community is depicted as largely based on a shared history of marginalization and external categorization, rather than based on inherent or essential racial characteristics. Johnson focuses on how black people have historically been treated by others, not on 'blackness' as something essential that has any meaning outside its relation to history. He describes race as an issue that surfaces in *relations* to external authorities, groups, and people. This relational surfacing becomes evident in the many musical events interrupted by the police or external forces in the poems. What starts out as a description of individual aesthetic experience evolves into an issue of race the moment the police walk in or the firebomb crashes into the room. According to Rancière, *the police order* precludes the emergence of politics. In Johnson's poetry, the sound system and bass-heavy dub music emerge as political because they challenge and create an alternative to the streets where the laws and logic of the police dominate. The police constantly try to preclude this activity.

7.6 Police suspicion of leisure and the sound system

Johnson was very critical of the English 'sus law', which he addresses in the 'anti-sus poem' 'Sonny's Lettah'. The abbreviation 'sus law' comes from 'suspected person' and is the informal name of a law that permitted the police to stop, search, and sometimes even arrest a person if they suspected the person was going to commit a crime. The tension around this legislation had an impact on the Brixton riot in 1981, which Johnson portrays in the poem 'Di Great Insohreckshan', from the album *Making History* (1984). The sus law was a revision of the Vagrancy Act of the early nineteenth century. The Victorian legislation was a law that

was mostly created to deal with the vagabonds, beggars, and homeless people occupying the streets (Vagrancy Act of 1824). Because of this origin, the law has a legacy of trying to control the use of public spaces.

As I have shown, Johnson depicts ‘rude boys’ hanging around in the street with a dandy-like demeanour. The poem ‘Inglan is a Bitch’, from the 1980 collection of the same name, portrays how newly arrived Caribbean immigrants experience life and especially work in London. The jobs depicted are traditionally working-class jobs in hotels, factories, construction, and public transport. The character in the poem ends up on the dole. The struggle to make ends meet is one aspect of the disappointing encounter with English society. However, ‘More time’, ‘Inglan is a Bitch’, and ‘Want fi Goh Rave’ emphasise the depressive and uninspiring encounter with dull work in a rather grey England. Unemployment is not the biggest problem. In the poems, more characters complain about dull work than about the lack of work. The reason why the men hang around cannot automatically be reduced to a problem of unemployment or to a lack of choice. Some of them choose to not work in a depressing and dull environment, even though their situation requires that they should. Their rather high standards challenge the idea that ‘beggars can’t be choosers’. In ‘Want fi Goh Rave’, the men prioritise the sound system party even though they are deprived. If one follows Jacques Rancière’s definition of politics, going to a sound system functions as a political act in the poem because it challenges the expectations that are directed towards how deprived people should act, feel, or behave:

Plato’s *Republic* shows at the outset that artisans don’t have the time to do anything other than their work: their occupation, their timetable and the capabilities that adapt them to it prohibit them from acceding to this supplement that political activity constitutes. Now, politics begins precisely when this impossibility is challenged, when those men and women who don’t have the time to do anything other than their work take the time they don’t have to prove that they are indeed speaking beings, participating in a shared world and not furious or suffering animals (Rancière, 2011, 4).

The characters show that they are not suffering animals. They are people capable of deliberative acts and deliberative speech, capable of more than merely expressing primal pain or intuitive reactions to their situation. They challenge the impossibilities and lack of opportunities that we commonly associate with them, and they show that art and aesthetic experience is not an ‘indulgence’ reserved for a small elite.

Time spent hanging around is more joyful than time spent at the workplace, and appears more as leisure than as an involuntary destiny. A lot of the time skanking and hanging around just being cool happens in public places, on the street, or outside shops. The police decide whether this behaviour is suspicious. The Brixton riots in 1981 were triggered

by what the black community experienced as a targeting of blacks in the enforcement of the law. The police have an important role in Johnson's poetry, as a force that governs the use of public spaces, and that enforces the establishment consensus about what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for different people. Suspicion occurs when someone's behaviour or presence is considered outside the norm. The cool 'rude boys' are generally targeted more in their spare time than when they are fulfilling a function or working. The law's history of targeting vagabonds reveals that hanging around is generally more suspicious than appearing to serve a function in the organization of the public space. Johnson's poetry describes the reality of 'stop and search', and how black men in Brixton were under scrutiny. A black man wearing fancy, expensive clothes, without showing any clear signs of gainful employment, was apparently very often deemed suspicious by the police. The suspicion of drug dealing or of being 'up to no good' was generally stronger in situations where they took time off from their duties or did not seem to have any. The poems depict how musical happenings were not just another suspicious place. They were especially targeted, and created a front between the police and the Jamaican community in London.

On an institutional level, the sound system configures an alternative space and sphere, where other rules apply than those enforced by the police on the streets: a sphere where the allocated position, possibilities, and identity of black people in Britain are put into question. The combination of the words 'sound' and 'system' is in itself interesting. Sound is not only a technical set-up, but also a 'system' of organizing society.

8 Conclusion: the politics of bass culture

The sound system creates an alternative institution and sphere in English society, but the bass ‘sound’ also creates its own alternative ‘system’ and logic on a micro level. This micro level transcends the sound system’s geographic location, and can be experienced at home or on the streets. The bass constantly challenges the relationship between pleasure and pain, good and bad, and reconfigures the meaning of violence. Bass culture presents the music as a form of madness ‘latent powah / in a form resemblin madness / like violence is di show / burstin outta slave shackle’ (Johnson, 2006, 15). Johnson has explored Jamaica’s violent past, filled with slavery and ‘dread’, but through bass violence, madness, and pain can be experienced in a different way than throughout history where their meaning was purely negative. The bass does not at all reverse or annihilate this negative historical experience, but shows that other meanings and experiences of these concepts are possible.

Jacques Rancière argues that ‘aesthetics’ is at the core of politics. The junction between politics and aesthetics is that both are a form of *distribution of the sensible*. Aesthetics is understood by Rancière in a Kantian sense, as a system of *a priori* forms that presents itself to experience:

It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stake of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time (Rancière, 2004, 13).

Rancière offers a theoretical framework for discussing the relationship between sound and ‘system’, bass and ‘culture’ in Johnson’s poetry. The bass represents a redistribution of *the sensible* that configures a specific space, and that frames a particular experience. What separates dub music from many other forms of music or art is that it redistributes the sensible in a violently physical way. This becomes evident in Johnson’s imagery of the walls of Babylon being smashed down by the music. According to Rancière, politics is a symbolic break with the order of relationships between ways of doing and ways of being (Rancière, 2004, 13). The bass violently creates a symbolic break, an alternative way of seeing and being, which fundamentally redefines the experience of pain and violence.

The term ‘bass culture’ shows that bass represents a culture and an alternative society to the one governed by the police. The relationship between aesthetics and politics in Johnson’s poetry is defined in the concepts of ‘bass culture’ and ‘rebel music’. Music and poetry, in other words the aesthetic, are political in Johnson’s work because they create

experiences that make it possible to inhabit other identities and positions than those allocated by the police or by the rules of 'Babylon'. The arbitrariness of these allocated positions and rules is revealed when black people can experience being something else than a victim. When Gordon Rohlehr writes, 'the revolution is usually felt first as a perceptible change in the bass', I argue that he points to this conjunction of politics and aesthetics in bass.

The sentence 'madness.....madness.....war' is repeated four times in 'Five Nights of Bleeding'. The bass represents a form of madness, irrationality, and unpredictability. Rancière postulates that politics is an anarchical process. Politics exists only in acts that lack any overall principle or law, and whose only common characteristic is *dissensus*. The word *dissensus* merges the meaning of 'sensual' and 'dissent', and points to how sensory perception can be a fundament for challenging established ways of seeing and thinking. *Dissensus* is not a quarrel or interpersonal conflict; it creates a 'fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought and action' (Rancière, 2004, 85). The madness of bass pushes the constant shift between pleasure and pain, good and bad, and creates *dissensus*. Bass has a strong political potential because of its inherent madness, and because of its anarchic nature that constantly redefines the direction and target of resistance. The anarchic unpredictability becomes evident in how fighting can suddenly break out in a dancehall. Whereas Jamaicans in London would become one homogenous group when confronting the police, this unity would often dissolve in the dance hall. Gang violence and internecine warfare represent what Johnson, inspired by Fanon, has described as 'the internalization of violence' (Johnson, 1976, 401). However, internecine warfare and gang violence also represent the reconfiguring of the community into new units, new victims, and new violators, and therefore the reconfiguring of the roles people inhabit.

There are also consequences of this reordering of the community that have a more positive nature. The sound system can configure new communities through shared musical experience and joy, rather than through experiences of victimization. However, the energy and power of the music can trigger both negative and positive changes, and these cannot be predicted. This is an inherent problem in the madness of bass, especially for those who use the sound system to achieve a specific political purpose. I believe that the anarchic madness is a crucial part of dub music's rebel identity, and the reason why this identity has remained intact until today, even though the sociopolitical context surrounding it has changed many times. Sometimes the target is not as important as the resistance in itself, or as important as the insistence on being a *counterculture*. Dub has come to

represent counterculture and ‘rebelism’ *per se*, which people from all over the world can identify with even though different people define different targets of this resistance.

8.1 Dub and the universal

The sound system also creates communities that transcend race and nationality. I have noticed that numerous books written about dub music, books directed towards a general, music-interested audience, emphasise reggae’s international success. The international success is presented as something that makes the history of reggae unique and a source of pride for many Jamaican. Reggae is a successful Jamaican export that has appealed to people worldwide, and that has given birth to offspring in many countries and continents. In Chapter 2, I presented how relativism has been a way to challenge the idea of European superiority in the arts. The reggae traditions seem to represent a slightly different approach. The *universal* appeal has been seen as a way of challenging European superiority in the arts. It was a form of popular music that was exported *from Jamaica to* Europe, and the rest of the world. This is an important part of the reggae mythos that must be considered when defining a reggae aesthetic in poetry.

The British reggae scene that Johnson is a part of is independent from the Jamaican reggae scene, and there are both musical and cultural differences between the two scenes. Johnson has expressed that even though reggae originated in Jamaica, it has transcended race and nationality: ‘What is interesting is that Jamaicans no longer have a monopoly on reggae music. Interesting to see the development of the Samba Reggae in Brazil. It's interesting to go to Japan and hear Japanese Raggamuffin' DJ's doing Dancehall in Japanese! So I think Reggae is a world music’ (Ludes, 1999). Many of the scholarly articles that I have read about Johnson understand reggae as a strictly black or Jamaican phenomenon, and therefore a sign of black resistance in his work. Habekost goes furthest by asking whether a white critic can fully understand the black phenomenon of dub poetry (Habekost, 1993, 11). This perspective does not acknowledge that most aspects of dub are not particularly black, but human. The reggae aesthetic creates a complex relationship between the particular and the universal in art. Reggae is synonymous with Jamaica and its people. However, European, Asian, African, and Latin American artists have appropriated the reggae rhythm and bass. You do not have to be black or Jamaican to feel the bass and rhythm, and this is crucial to reggae’s aesthetic and politics. When the important dub poet Michal Smith was asked whether people could understand his work if they were not familiar with Jamaican language and culture, he

answered, 'You can feel it. If you can't understand some of it, you can feel it' (Markham, 1989, 282). He believes that though some readers might struggle to understand the language or the culturally specific references of dub poetry, there are aspects of the work that can be communicated regardless. It is interesting that Smith distinguishes between 'understanding' and 'feeling'. He shows that there is both an intellectual understanding and a sensory experience at work. Feeling is described as an efficient form of communication even when understanding reaches its limitations. I do not understand feeling as a purely psychological or emotional concept here. I argue that Smith describes something close to a *sensus communis*, and that people can share some levels of sensory experience and be affected by it, even though they come from different cultures. The aesthetic experience does represent a universal capability in his discourse. Johnson expresses similar sentiments, and addresses the possible community between the poet and readers:

The musician, singer and dub lyricist are mostly sufferers. Through music, song and poetry, they give spiritual expression to their own inner beings, to their own experience. But in so doing, they are also giving spiritual expression to the collective experience of sufferation that is shared by all sufferers (Johnson, 1976, 399).

There is an important connection between the individual's experience and a collective experience in Johnson's poetry. He writes that the musicians/poets express their own experience, but by doing so they also express the collective experience of 'all sufferers'. He thereby implies that people share the capacity to experience, and can experience what others experience. The expression 'all sufferers' gives us no reason to think that this capacity follows racial lines. When we look at a poet like Johnson, who is strongly inspired by a reggae aesthetic, we must acknowledge that reggae represents much more than a Jamaican or black struggle. Reggae grew out of black experience in Jamaica, but also thematises human experience and 'human struggle'. Many critics feel obligated to focus on issues of race when they read Johnson's poetry because he often depicts racial discrimination. However, I think that many critics, Habekost is a good example, have a one-dimensional focus on him as a 'black poet' writing about black problems. His influence from reggae is inaccurately used to substantiate this view. Does the act of addressing racial struggle exclude a poet from the genres of literature that wish to say something about the human condition? The depiction of black experience can have universal ambitions, which is often the case in reggae. My argument is that Johnson's poetry is just as much a depiction of the outsider position and of a rebel existence. These universal themes are evoked through the particular depiction of being black in Britain in the seventies.

Reggae has always combined the local and regional with universal concerns. It is an example of a postcolonial art form that also is an international popular culture. The merging of these two aspects is crucial to the reggae aesthetic. The leap from traditional folk music to international popular culture distinguishes reggae from many other ‘third world’ musical phenomena. Kwame Dawes emphasises this difference: ‘Unlike Calypso, reggae went international and managed to do so on its own terms largely because of the ‘universalist’ spiritual sentiments that came into reggae from Rastafarianism’ (Dawes, 1999, 56). Reggae had less commercial and universal success when Johnson wrote his poems in the seventies, but reggae had already crossed over into a punk and rock audience in England. Already in the seventies, it had created communities that transcended race and nationality, fundamentally challenging the racist system that the police represent in the poems.

Boehmer writes that it is the idea of a *universal a priori* aesthetic that is most difficult to combine with the postcolonial. In the context of dub, I argue that a universal *a priori* aesthetic and the strong physical and sensual impact of music have a positive meaning, where rhythm and bass can bring people together in a unique way precisely because they are an autonomous form of experience that works on a different level than the ideological or intellectual. I am aware that universal claims at the end of a thesis can be reductive, but I am of course not under the illusion that I have proved the existence of universal *a priori* aesthetics in this thesis. I have wanted to show that regardless of empirical evidence or truth, universalist rhetoric is commonplace in how Jamaican musicians and poets talk about aesthetic experience. I have wanted to bring attention to how the reggae tradition shows that the *belief* in universal *a priori* aesthetics is not necessarily a Western way of thinking, and does not necessarily have to be in opposition to postcolonial literature.

8.2 Aesthetics without the concept of ‘aesthetics’

The aesthetic experience of dub’s bass is, as mentioned, an experience of ‘pure’ sound similar to what Kant calls ‘music phantasies’. Simultaneously, the music is very physical and therefore challenges the rigid Kantian separation of the beautiful and the physically pleasing. However, one could argue that dub music’s complex relationship between pleasure and pain shares some characteristics with Kant’s description of the sublime, particularly when Johnson uses natural imagery to describe the music, for example, ‘volcano core’ in ‘Bass Culture’ and ‘thunder’, ‘lightning’, and ‘electrical storm’ in ‘Reggae Sounds’. I will not be able to discuss the potential connection between the sublime and dub poetry further in this thesis. But it is a

good example of interesting questions to be assessed in the future, questions that can help assess whether it is accurate or fruitful to position Kant opposite the enormously varied field of postcolonial writing.

I have tried to show that a rigid Kantian perspective might not be very applicable to dub, but that there are many aspects that nevertheless are fruitful to see in connection with each other. Through my readings, I have found more similarities than differences when looking past the fact that there is an apparent difference in the way people speak about aesthetic experience and art. Kant belongs to an elite academic and scientific tradition; the dub producer or dub poet does not use academic vocabulary or academic concepts. However, does this difference automatically mean that they are not describing the same things? The reason why I find the similarities interesting is that they show that even though traditions use different terms and concepts to describe the aesthetic, or do not use the term 'aesthetic' at all, does not necessarily mean that they are not preoccupied with aesthetics. By comparing Kant's description of music with King Jammy's, I have tried to show that if one looks past the apparent difference in vocabulary and language, there is a similar attempt to explain how music creates a form of perception that is primarily sensory rather than intellectual, conceptual, or rational. Both are ultimately trying to communicate something about the musical experience that is very fundamental and that is difficult to put into words because it is so intuitive.

The *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*' article about Caribbean aesthetics, mentioned in Chapter 2, argues that concepts like 'aesthetic', 'work of art', and 'aesthetic expression' are infrequent in Caribbean discourse and are problematic in the sociopolitical context of the Caribbean. Considering the immensely important role of music in the Caribbean and the spiritual, almost metaphysical, rhetoric about music as an art form, especially in Jamaican reggae tradition, I do not find this argument fully convincing. Later in the article, the important role of 'rhythm' in the Caribbean is mentioned. I find it interesting that the important discourse about 'rhythm' in the Caribbean is not presented as a discourse on aesthetics, but rather as a discourse on a cultural phenomenon. The article also argues that 'culture' is a more predominant concept than 'aesthetic' is in the Caribbean. Maybe the absence of these terms is an expression of scepticism towards the Western academic tradition these words are associated with, rather than a dismissal of the importance of aesthetic experience *per se*? It is possible that Caribbean academics are less interested in terms like 'aesthetic' or 'work of art', and that these terms are less used in the Caribbean. In a culture where many people lack education, many people might never encounter the word 'aesthetic'

or be aware of the philosophical tradition behind the term. On the other hand, ‘culture’ is a more colloquial word, one more used than ‘aesthetic expression’ amongst people outside of academia in Europe as well. People can be engaged in aesthetic experience and affected by ‘works of art’ without being aware of these concepts. Critics of postcolonial literature should not dismiss the aesthetic aspects of postcolonial literature just because the term ‘aesthetics’ is not equally present in all societies or groups. As I have tried to show by comparing King Jammy with Kant, it is fruitful to try to look beyond the apparent difference in terminology, and to look at what the *practice*, focus, and topics of the reggae discourse are. The fascinating thing about aesthetic theory is that it formulates and explains something that almost everyone has thought about at some point: How do I explain the impact art, poetry, or music has on me when I do not really have any words to describe it? In essence, aesthetic theory should not be understood as an elitist academic field, but rather as an attempt at understanding a form of experience that can be expressed in many ways, and in many types of language, by both educated and uneducated people.

8.3 Subverting high and low poetry

Johnson’s poetry and essays make many contributions to a discussion about the nature of poetry and art; however, in the nineties poem ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’, this discussion becomes explicit. I present this reading at the end of my thesis because it offers some metacritical perspectives that contextualize the seventies poems. ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’ shows that Johnson has tried to challenge the dominant and mainstream definition of literary value ever since he argued that deejays that toasted over rhythms were poets. The poem opens with the juxtaposition of two epigraphs:

‘dub poetry has been described as...“over-compensation for deprivation”’.
Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry

‘mostofthestraighteningisinthetongue’
Bongo Jerry (Johnson, 2006, 94).

The juxtaposition of these epigraphs creates a contrast between the Oxford companion, which represents the mainstream English canon, and the pioneering Rastafarian poet Bongo Jerry, who represents a poetic tradition in a peripheral relationship to the canon of English literature. I argue that Rastafarian poetry represents a counterculture in the poem on two levels: It is a cultural, religious, and political reaction to colonial and Western domination of the Jamaican people. On the other hand, it is not an organized or official religion, and is

therefore a counterculture within Jamaican society. There are no exact numbers, but self-defined Rastafarians represent only 1–5% of the population in Jamaica (Cunningham, 2012).³⁵ The Rastafarian movement is a counterculture in relation to the official Protestant Christian Jamaican mainstream. Therefore, Bongo Jerry's quote represents resistance not only towards the English canon, but also counterculture as an artistic ideal in general.

To juxtapose the two quotes is also to juxtapose 'high' and 'low' culture. Oxford is a world-renowned elite brand, while Bongo Jerry is hardly recognised as an important poet outside of Jamaica. The quote from the Oxford Companion places dub poetry in the context of deprivation and poverty. However, the Bongo Jerry quote shows how reductive this understanding can be. Bongo Jerry's line appears as an experimental form, a strange and compelling representation of sounds and meanings. The Oxford Companion quote appears dull and uninspiring in comparison. The juxtaposition also shows that there can be a contrast between what is said about dub poetry, and how the art form appears when we stand face to face with it. The contrast makes the reader reflect upon the limitations of institutionalized critical idioms that do not acknowledge dub poetry as an experimental art form. What some understand as signs of social deprivation might in reality be a willed poetic experimentation that challenges the norms of good poetry and bourgeois taste. The epigraphs subvert the opposition between high and low, because the quote in the Oxford Companion is presented as prejudiced and somewhat philistine in its blindness towards the alternative poetic form that Bongo Jerry represents.

The juxtaposition of the two quotes at the beginning of the poem does share some characteristics with the epigraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. Dubois, which was one of the books that inspired Johnson to become a poet. Dubois was a sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist. He also co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. *The Souls of Black Folk* is considered a classic work of American literature. Each chapter opens with a lyrical epigraph with a musical score. The epigraphs include lines from Lord Byron, Friedrich von Schiller, James Lowell, and African-American spirituals. The epigraphs combine Africa-American lyrical expressions with the canon of American and European poetry (Sundquist, 1996). Dubois challenged the hierarchy between the two traditions by juxtaposing them as equal poetic expressions of human emotions and aspirations. He showed that spirituals were not inferior to the Western literary canon; they had the same complexity and impact. This was an important

³⁵ According to the Population and Housing Census (2011) by the Statistical Institute of Jamaica, there are 29,026 self-identified Rastafarians in Jamaica.

critical statement in the context of the early twentieth century ‘when spirituals were assumed to be primitive, unrefined, and even childlike’ (Carrol, 2005, 250). Dubois created a connection between the acknowledgement of black people’s equal rights with the acknowledgement of black poetry’s value. Johnson shares some of these characteristics when he challenges the idea of dub poetry as overcompensation for deprivation, and when he demonstrates its value as an art form. Like Dubois, he juxtaposes different poetic traditions so we can reassess the relationship between them and confront our criteria for judging good and bad, high and low. Like Dubois, he points to the inherent racism in the evaluation of historically black art as deprived or not equally complex. However, I argue that the question of literary value also transcends the question of race in ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’. For Dubois, the biggest problem of the twentieth century was the problem of racism, which had in turn led to the prejudice towards black art. In ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’, the problem is not primarily black vs white, but style vs style. The negative evaluation of historically black art like dub poetry is not caused by direct racism anymore, but can sometimes be a consequence of the hierarchy between literary styles. In the poem, the components of ‘high’ and ‘low’ poetry are no longer defined by the ethnicity of the hand holding the pen, as we see in the first two stanzas:

if I woz a tap-natch poet
 Like Chris Okigbo,
 Derek Walcot³⁶
 ar T.S. Eliot

I woodah write a poem
 soh dyam deep
 dat it bittah-sweet
 like a precious
 memari
 whe mek yu weep
 whe mek yu feel incomplete (Johnson, 2006, 94).

The formulation ‘if I woz’ implies that Johnson does not consider himself one of the great poets, or as a part of the literary mainstream or canon. His examples of ‘tap-natch’ poets reveal that the separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ is not defined by ethnicity. These poets represent different ethnicities and nationalities. However, these three poets are all considered modernists or heavily influenced by modernism. The composition of the group of poets is based on stylistic and not ethnic unity. The second stanza humorously describes his literary

³⁶ ‘Walcot’ is a misspelling. It should be Walcott. If intentional, this misspelling breaks an academic taboo. The speaker asserts that he either is uneducated or displays a lack of respect for formalities and proper English. He is not afraid of appearing ignorant, or of not being considered elite or top-notch.

accomplishments if he had belonged to this group of great poets. This shows a self-critical awareness of his style. He knows what kind of poetry he could have potentially written, which makes the fact that he did not seem as a *choice*, and not a sign of ignorance. The poem also creates a canon, not necessarily equivalent to the actual canon. This is particularly revealed by one small detail added by the publisher. After the name ‘Chris Okigbo’, there is a footnote that informs ‘Nigerian poet who died in the Secessionist war of the 1960’s’. There is no footnote after ‘Walcot’ and Eliot, the two Nobel Laureates in Literature. This footnote demonstrates that these poets are not equally a part of the official canon, but is rather an expression of Johnson’s personal understanding of the canon. The reference to T. S. Eliot is interesting because he has an important place in Caribbean literary criticism. Kamau Brathwaite, one of the most influential Caribbean literary critics and defenders of poetry written in nation languages, including dub poetry, has stated that Eliot is the only European influence he will acknowledge. Eliot’s use of dialect speech and colloquial contemporary idioms inspired Brathwaite to develop his own theory of nation language poetry (Pollard, 2004, 81).³⁷

T.S. Eliot has a double position in the poem, which makes his role in the canon even stronger than usual. He is a part of both the Western canon and the canon of literature that has defined Caribbean literary criticism. The poem illustrates that there is an interconnection between these literary traditions, and Derek Walcott symbolises where modernism and Caribbean tradition meet. In the first two stanzas, Johnson distances his own style from modernist poetry because the latter is ‘tap-natch’, or associated with ‘fine’ art, not because it is understood as un-Caribbean or white. This becomes evident when he also humorously distances himself from the ‘rootsy’ and subversive Caribbean and African-American poets:

if I woz a tap-natch poet
 like Kamau Brathwaite
 Martin Carter
 Jayne Cortez or Amiri Baraka

I woodah write a poem
 soh rude
 an rootsy
 an subversive
 dat it mek di goon poet
 tun white with envy (Johnson, 2006, 96).

³⁷ Brathwaite defines ‘nation language’ as oral non-standardised Creole languages spoken in Caribbean nations, for example Jamaican patois.

These poets' names are succeeded by a footnote explaining who they are. The footnotes yet again reveal that the poem represents Johnson's canon of literary influences, not necessarily a consensus, even though Eliot and Walcott may have one foot in the 'imagined canon' and one in the actual canon. Whereas modernist poetry is humorously depicted as excessively esoteric, the 'authentic' and 'rootsy' poetry is depicted as excessively subversive. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Shiner points out that there will always exist 'small coteries who will consider only the most daunting and esoteric works or the most socially and politically shocking works to be "real art"' (Shiner, 2001, 307). Johnson makes fun of these dogmas tongue in cheek, and expresses that there is room for the poet that cannot fully satisfy either of these coteries. The speaker seems not to see the purpose of even trying, which expresses an acceptance of the possibilities that lie in between these poles. This is an example of how Johnson's discussion of poetry challenges the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous art by exploring the possibilities that are available when the poet refuses to choose a side.

Both styles are described as 'tap-natch'. They equally succeed in satisfying two different, but equally dogmatic views of literary value. These poets represent the elite of two different literary traditions and cultures. Eliot has inspired Brathwaite, and the reference to both of them creates a bridge between the two groups. Even though the groups are very different, the bridge between Brathwaite and Eliot reveals that they are not mutually exclusive. They both belong to an academic elite where thoughts and inspirations circulate. They both represent groups of voices that have shaped the thoughts of others, and that have contributed to paradigms of Caribbean literary criticism. Johnson emphasizes his outsider status in relation to both elites: 'Still / inna di meantime / wid mi riddim / wid mi rime / wid mi ruff base line / wid mi own sense a time' (Johnson, 2006, 95). He emphasizes that he has his own poetic style, rhythm, and flow. He does not define his style in terms of theme or intellect, but rather in terms of formal characteristics. He does not consider himself a top-notch poet, but believes that he has a unique style. This faith in his own style and originality appears confident, and he does not seem to envy or feel inferior to the other poets. Why is the voice so confident in his own style and originality without defining himself as 'tap-natch'? My interpretation is that 'tap-natch' means more than being good or talented; it refers to a kind of aura of greatness that comes with being a part of the literary elite. The reason why both elites can be considered mainstream becomes clearer when we look at the climate of Caribbean literary criticism. Since the Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in 1971, held at The University of The West Indies in

Jamaica, Caribbean literary criticism has been largely shaped by Brathwaite, who argued for the value of ‘the little tradition’ and folk culture, in opposition to the great tradition of English literature (Breiner, 1998, 1–24). Even though Brathwaite wrote in reaction to the great tradition of English literature, his own writing has become a part of the great canon of Caribbean criticism. Even though T.S. Eliot is more famous than Brathwaite, they both belong to the group of elite literary critics that have shaped academic scholarship. The modernists and the roots poets represent two different poles of the academic mainstream definitions of literary quality, and Johnson distances himself from both.

The poem idealises Johnson’s outsider status, and makes it seem as if though he takes pride in not being a part of the literary establishment. The irony is however, that the literary establishment has increasingly celebrated Johnson, as demonstrated by his inclusion in Penguin Modern Classics. Therefore, the poem romanticizes the outsider poet, where he insists on keeping a countercultural identity even when he has become a part of the literary establishment. If the poem included only the modernists, one could argue that he questions a modernist aesthetic hegemony. But since he includes other types of poetry, he seems to just oppose the idea of ‘high’ or ‘fine’ art in general, and the idea of stylistic excellence necessarily being preferred to the amateur with his ‘own sense of time’. He has emphasised that you do not need a university degree to write poetry that appeals to your peers. In many ways, Johnson expresses a democratic and inclusive view of poetry, where the idea of ‘tap-natch’ poetry is less compelling than the inclusiveness of every person and theme into poetic form. Not living up to the dominant definitions of great poetry becomes a poetic ideal, and changing our notions of what makes good poetry becomes a motivation. This anti-establishment position is strengthened by the epigraph from Bongo Jerry, who represents a double outsider status.

One could argue that the speaker does not have to be Johnson himself, but a fictional character. That would not make a big difference, because the poem would still look at the canon through an outsider’s perspective and privilege the ‘underdog’ poet in contrast to the elite. ‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’ argues that you can contribute with something poetically interesting and move people, even though you are not great. Poetry can be appropriated by anyone, and does not belong to a privileged set of people or a privileged set of styles. The poem expresses that the interesting thing about poetry is not the predefined separation of high and low, but how poetry continuously redefines this relationship. This poem is an example of how Johnson’s poetry reshapes this relationship by asking what is necessarily so great about being ‘tap-natch’.

‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’ makes it evident that the hierarchy between different kinds of poetry is not decided by ethnicity anymore, but existing stylistic hierarchies can consequently create ethnic exclusion. Johnson’s poetry has contributed to defending the value of black poetry and culture in Britain, through his involvement in the carnival movement, *Race Today*, and the Black Panther’s. However, Johnson’s poetry expresses artistic views that transcend race issues, where the main challenge is low vs high art in general. The aspect of racial politics is in this way interconnected with a metacritical problem of opposing the hierarchy between ‘fine art’ and ‘craft’, autonomous and heteronomous art. This hierarchy has led not only to a negative evaluation of traditionally black art forms like dub poetry, but also to a negative evaluation of many popular cultural forms in general, which are two problems that are merged in the reggae form. Johnson has commented on the division of ‘real poetry’ and its ‘distant relative’:

There’s a similar division in the world of poetry, where you have poetry on the one hand and this other thing they call “performance poetry” on the other. My work is nearly always put in the “performance poetry” category. And obviously, performance as an adjective is often used in a pejorative way, as though it was not “real” poetry but a distant relative or a distant cousin of real poetry (Wheatle, 2009, 39).

Here Johnson actually comments on the division of autonomous literature from literature that is performed in a social context. The main challenge for Johnson has not been to get people to accept that dub poetry is good in its own right. The main challenge has been to get people to take it seriously as *poetry*, and to stop treating it as the ‘distant relative’.

I postulate that Johnson’s poetry should be understood as a part of a wider countercultural movement against a mainstream understanding of ‘fine art’ in England in the late seventies. By introducing the combination of reggae subculture, black struggle, popular street culture, and politics to poetry, he did something that appealed to other subcultures that wished to challenge mainstream values and taste at the time. In 1978, Johnson shared a line up with The Pop Group, Nico, and Cabaret Voltaire at the Electric Ballroom in London. In 1979, he played with Public Image Ltd and the punk poet John Cooper Clark (Rock’s back pages library). Johnson shared the stage with rock and punk bands in the late seventies, the period when he was most active in the Black Panthers. Why was this diverse line up a natural combination of artists? A lot has been written about the connection between the reggae scene and the punk scene in England in the seventies. Many have suggested that these two scenes united because they were both subcultures that identified with each other’s rebel attitude, energy, and anti-establishment mentality. These countercultural sentiments in Johnson’s poems sometimes disappear when critics focus only on racial and national allegiances, and

underestimate Johnson's general romanticization of the rebel outsider and the anti-establishment poet. The punk and reggae scene in the seventies both consisted of outcasts that differed from the mainstream and that worshipped the outsider persona. This explanation may seem simplistic, but the connection reveals an interesting aspect. The reggae aesthetic in poetry did not concern or appeal just to black people. Together with other subcultures and countercultures within art and music in the late seventies, it challenged the system of art divided that defended the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous art: fine art and popular culture, aesthetic and political literature, poetry and performance poetry.

How do you discuss Johnson's poetry in context without departing from the field of literature and arriving at the field of cultural studies? This is one of the challenges I have encountered when writing this thesis. However, I have asked myself why Johnson's poetry would be considered culture instead of poetry, and why I worry about departing from my field. This fear might come from the experience that expanded definitions of poetry are easier to accept in theory than in practice. The system of art divided has a hold on our way of thinking about literature, individually, but especially institutionally. This is a reason why Johnson's poems are challenging, and why they force the critic to look into some fundamental problems for literary studies. The poetry challenges the system of art divided, and the separation of autonomous literature from 'mere' writing. As I have mentioned, the pressure to choose one of these sides is inflicted by both Kantian aestheticians and postcolonial critics. I have tried not to force the poems into the ideal of autonomous literature, but at the same time not to turn them into an indistinct cultural product and thereby reverse the polarity. It is difficult to balance these two poles in equal amounts at all times, and I feel that I have had to move back and forth across these lines. Johnson's poetry demands specific modes of attention, but the poems are in conversation with life, and it is precisely this play that I have wanted to bring attention to.

Regardless of his contributions to expanding definitions of poetry, it is still not possible to ignore that Johnson is much more known as a 'black poet' than as a poet that has contributed to our shared understanding of poetry. Johnson has commented on the obligation he felt as a poet in the seventies: 'I didn't believe that at that time a black poet could have the luxury of art for art's sake' (Prasad, 2002). He believed that 'art for art's sake' was a luxury he did not have, because of the constant discrimination against black people and the responsibility placed on the poet to address these problems. This feeling of personal responsibility to address these problems does not mean that politically engaged art is preferred to art for art's sake. Politics is a sad reality that has imposed itself on the poet. The

lack of ‘luxury’ or privilege to create ‘art for art’s sakes’ is not a choice, but ultimately symbolizes a burden. Johnson has in recent years said that he would like to be considered *just a poet*, not a black poet, not a dub poet or not a performance poet (Wheatle, 2009). He is still constantly placed within the divisions of poetry that he tries to challenge the existence of. When we look at the reception of his work, we see that his claim to being treated as just a poet is seldom respected. It is a privilege he might not have had – yet.

The privilege to create and enjoy ‘art for art’s sake’ rests on having a minimum of individual freedom and autonomy. The postcolonial literary critic may reinforce this lack of privilege and turn it into a normative statement – postcolonial writers should not produce art for art’s sake – or, treat it as a burden from which they ought to be relieved someday. It should be made easier than it is today for postcolonial poets to retain an individuality and to convey meanings that are not of a predefined political or ideological frame. The consequence may be that one ends up questioning some of the *raisons d’êtres* for postcolonial literature’s status as a separate category of literature. This problem may be a paradox, but I believe that postcolonial literary critics should continuously assess which is the biggest sacrifice: the individuality of the poet and the unique voice, or the greater cause?

Different generations and contexts may require different answers to that question. A lot has happened since Johnson started writing in the seventies. My ambition with this thesis has been to show that the view of Johnson’s poetry’s achievements will change as the world around it changes. I must be self-critically honest and acknowledge that as a child of the nineties, I have felt that many current readings still focus on factors that were radical in the seventies and still speak as if we were living in that world, and as if the same ideological framework could be applied to the current political context. I do not dismiss the importance of the historical context, but I believe that we must treat it as historical. In a contemporary academic climate where professors and students study gangster rap at university, the fact that Johnson is black and writing about black experience, is not enough to understand why his writing is interesting, unique, or gaining entry into the canon today. The unique poetics and politics of the poems will continue to surface in the future if we treat the poems primarily as poetry, and if we do not rush to position them within a postcolonial political framework that shows us things we can learn by reading any other postcolonial author. Johnson’s poems introduce many interesting literary themes and formal devices, and I hope some of them have been made visible in this thesis.

This thesis has shown that Johnson’s concepts of ‘bass culture’ and ‘bass history’ give aesthetic experiences a political dimension. Bass challenges the opposition between the

beautiful and the physically pleasing. Bass is also 'pure sound' that intervenes and changes its surroundings in a very violent way, and that therefore symbolises the possibility of change. The sound system is an important Jamaican institution, but it is also an alternative way of life to the one ruled by domination and oppression. Dub music can smash down the walls of Babylon because it is not only sound, but also an alternative 'system'. Violence and militancy is depicted as inherent in the music, and Johnson's diction and use of literary devices like alliteration and capitalisation aspires towards a similar kind of violence.

Johnson's influence from reggae lyricism has been mainly understood as synonymous with a radical ideological, anti-Western stance in the poetry. However, reggae lyricism is extremely diverse, and therefore this ideological understanding is a one-dimensional understanding of the genre. Reggae has a very non-hierarchical view of different topics and themes, which informs an inclusive view of poetry. This is why Johnson can combine the deeply personal with the explicitly political, representation and abstraction, without betraying the reggae aesthetic. The poems also challenge the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous literature, and notions of poetry based on divisions of high and low. The poems express a will to expand our definition of poetry, and fight against the elitism that excludes certain themes, styles, and people from poetry.

Johnson's inspiration from the reggae tradition also challenges many of the perceived oppositions between postcolonial resistance and aesthetics in literature. The reggae traditions exemplify that universal *a priori* aesthetics can have a positive meaning within a postcolonial discourse. The tradition also shows that aesthetic theory is not an elitist interest or a middle-class indulgence; rather, it is something people are fascinated by and discuss in the language that is natural to them. Reggae lyricists and dub poets are very interested in aesthetic theory, but many critics fail to recognize their interest as such, and have retained a stereotype of aesthetics being an indulgence for poor non-Western people.

Johnson's poems thematically portray everyday life in Brixton. Many of the poems depict violent confrontation between the police and black British youth that takes place at sound systems. The poems describe a reality where the police impose themselves on all aspects of everyday life, even the aesthetic sphere of the sound system. The capability to enjoy 'art for art's sake' rests on a minimum of freedom or time off from the police, and from the predefined political issues that follow the characters everywhere. In the poems, the possibility to take part in the aesthetic experience of music and poetry was a right that had to be violently defended, and a cause rather than a distraction from postcolonial struggle. In this sense, the sphere of art is often turned into a political battleground in the poems, where the

politics of the sound 'system' come in conflict with the politics of the police. One important characteristic of Johnson's poetry is that aesthetic experience is the central motif and theme. The poems therefore offer some metacritical perspectives about the role of aesthetic experience when one reads the poems. In this thesis, I have used this perspective to show that the poems' diction, rhythm, and bass configure the poems' own politics, a politics that often comes into conflict with the postcolonial critic's own political agenda.

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