
Writing as a Political Act: Why Black Narrative Power Matters

**Black History Month spotlight |
Linton Kwesi Johnson**

"Writing was a political act and poetry was a cultural weapon."
Linton Kwesi Johnson said this about his own work, and it is the right place to start. It is the argument in miniature: poetry, and words more broadly, are a form of power.





That power matters especially now. **Black people's prerogative, and power, to tell their own narrative** is being quietly eroded: through the growing scrutiny of anti-racist practice, the rollback of equality, diversity and inclusion work, and a wider climate that increasingly treats naming your own experience as the problem rather than the point.

Kimberle Crenshaw's work is a useful example of the same fight playing out in another field. Her case for intersectionality, and campaigns she has helped lead such as **#SayHerName**, both insist that when Black people's experiences, and Black women's in particular, are folded into broader categories or described only by others, something essential is lost; not just detail, but the authority to say what happened and what it meant.

This is exactly why **poetry, written work and art made by Black artists** matter more than ever. They occupy a subversive space, commenting on what is happening in real time, in a voice that cannot easily be edited, softened or spoken over. A policy can be reversed, and a report can be shelved, but nobody can take away power once it has been carried in words. Rhythm and rhyme are something genuinely their own.

Linton Kwesi Johnson's own life shows what that looks like in practice. Born in Chapelton, Jamaica, in 1952, he came to London in 1963, and while still at school he joined the Black Panthers, helping to run a poetry workshop within the movement.

He went on to coin the term **"dub poetry"**: verse rooted in Jamaican sound system culture, written to be performed against a reggae rhythm rather than simply read.

His decision to write in Jamaican Creole rather than Standard English was not a stylistic flourish. It was, in the words of the poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite, an act of **"nation language"**: the language of a community, carrying its own rhythms and its own history, rather than the language of those who governed it.

Johnson has said as much himself, explaining that he found the English language **"too dead, too sterile"** to communicate the violence of what he saw happening around him, and that he turned instead to the language of the people whose experience he wanted to write about.



That instinct runs through more than a single poem. In **"Sonny's Lettah"** (1979), subtitled **"Anti-Sus Poem"**, a young man writes home from Brixton Prison to explain how a police stop and search under the so called "sus" laws, which allowed officers to treat Black men as suspects without any actual offence, ended in violence, arrest and a policeman's death.

In **"New Craas Massakah"** (1983), Johnson wrote an elegy for the fourteen young Black people killed in the New Cross Fire of January 1981, widely believed at the time to have been a racist arson attack, and met with an official silence that stood in sharp contrast to the government's swift condolences after a comparable fire in Dublin weeks later.

Read alongside **"Di Great Insohreckshan"**, these poems show Johnson working, as one scholar has described him, as a griot of London's Caribbean diaspora: chronicling a community's experience of policing, loss and resistance in real time, from inside it, at a moment when official accounts were slow to acknowledge any of it.





That is nowhere clearer than in "**Di Great Insohreckshan**" itself, Johnson's 1983 poem written in response to the Brixton Uprising of April 1981. Years of discriminatory stop and search under the Metropolitan Police's "Swamp '81" operation had built the pressure that broke that weekend. The Scarman Report, commissioned by the government afterwards, concluded that oppressive policing, and in particular the harassment of young Black people on the streets of Brixton, was an overwhelming cause of what followed. Press coverage at the time called it a riot. Johnson called it something else: an **insohreckshan, an insurrection**. Even his spelling makes the point: he capitalises "Brixtan", the place and its people, but not "babylan", his own phonetic rendering of Babylon, his name for the police and the state. That single choice of word and capital letter carries the whole argument. Whoever gets to name an event gets to shape how it is remembered, and Johnson used his own language, on his own terms, to insist that this was resistance rather than senseless disorder, written from inside the community whose experience it describes rather than about it from a distance. That is what makes it **testimony as much as art**.





This Black History Month, spotlighting artists like Linton Kwesi Johnson is not only a look back. It is a way of protecting exactly what is under pressure right now: **the right of Black communities to comment on their own history and their own present, in their own voice**, artfully, emotionally, meaningfully and soulfully. That right cannot simply be legislated away. It lives in the words themselves.

Sources

- Kim Evelyn, "Resistance and the Dub Griot: Four Linton Kwesi Johnson Poems, Policing, and Social Unrest", *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2020).
 - The Poetry Archive, biography of Linton Kwesi Johnson (poetryarchive.org).
- 