

A close reading of sonny's lettah



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Race played a huge role in determining a relationship with the police in London after the mass migration of non-caucasian individuals. The poem 'Sonny's Lettah' by Linton Kwesi Johnson provides a clear representation of how the black race was treated on the streets, and their relationship with authoritative figures. The poem also portrays the relationships of black individuals in London with each other and their willingness to stand up one another. The poem's narrator, Sonny, is writing a letter to his mother describing an unprovoked incident on the side of the street involving him, a man named Jim, and the police. The incident described in the letter highlights the unfair treatment of individuals of a different skin colour by the police and their punishments for attempting to defend themselves. The nationality of the narrator of the poem is made clear not by a physical description, but rather the language used.

The Caribbean language is the clue that lets readers know that Sonny is not native to Britain, and is a black individual. In his letter he states that he made a promise to his mother to look out for Jim, but despite this promise, Jim had been targeted and had ended up arrested.[1] It is made clear that Sonny and Jim we're doing nothing out of the ordinary and certainly nothing that should have drawn the police's attention to them. It was just another normal evening in London, they were simply minding their own business when they were approached by officers: One a den hol awn to Jim | seh him tekin him in; | Jim tell him fi let goh a him | far him non dhu notn.[2] This narrative is a clear example of sus policing. Police were known to target young, black men and would arrest them not for committing a crime, but on suspicion that they were about to commit a crime. Since there is no clear

reason stated as to why the police would specifically target Jim, it is to be understood that Jim is being antagonized for his race and this was suspicious policing in action. It can even be assumed from the narration that the police were enjoying their attack on Jim because, " di police start to giggle".[3] It can be drawn from this line that the attack of a different race could be viewed as the police's form of amusement. Unfortunately, there was little that these targeted individuals could do to counter the police and their attacks. The police viewed themselves as superior compared to those of colour. Even worse, there was no one to keep the police's actions in check and tell them that their racial targeting was wrong.

In Sonny's description of the attack on Jim in the letter, he never mentions any attempt of Jim's to fight back against the police. Sonny however had promised to protect Jim, which is why he could not simply watch Jim be abused and do nothing to help. So Sonny fought back against the police in the attempt to do right by Jim and for his race. So Sonny: ...Jook one in him eye | and him start to cry | mi trump one in him mout | an him started to shout | mi kick one pan him shin | an him started to spin | mi trump him pan him chin | an him drap pan a bin.[4] At that particular moment it seemed Sonny saw violence as his only option to defend not only Jim, but also everyone who shared their struggle against the police. If Sonny had just stood by and watched them attack Jim, the police force would win. They would see nothing wrong with their actions and they would continue to target individuals similar to Jim. This was Sonny's attempt to repress the police and their actions. Sonny's choice however did not end in triumph for him, and in a way the police still won over Sonny and his race.

Sonny's retaliation still ended up with the police force being victorious in their assault. Because of the violence, " dem charge Jim fi sus, | den charge mi fi murdah".[5] While Sonny only had the best intentions of helping Jim, he caused more harm than help by fatally injuring a police officer in his retaliation against their abuse. In this sense the police were able to maintain their superiority by making Sonny, and his race, out to be the bad guys. Not only did Jim end up in custody, which was their original goal, but also Sonny. At the end of the letter though, Sonny does not seem to be too upset, which is strange given the situation he has found himself in. In the letter he tells his mother: Mama, | don't fret, | don't get depress | and doun-hearted. | Be af good courage. | till I hear fram you.[6] Sonny's race has been constantly put down and abused by the police. It had affected Sonny when they attacked Jim, and it became even more personal when Sonny chose to get involved in the fight against the abuse, landing himself in jail. However, the narrator ends his letter with a tone of optimism. He is telling his mother that even though he is in jail, she should not worry for him or be upset about his current situation. He will be fine. Is this because Sonny sees himself as safer in jail than he felt day to day on the streets? When he was free he was a target for the police to randomly chose to attack. At least in their custody that is no longer a possibility, the worst may already be behind him. It is clear throughout the poem that the police did not think highly of individuals of a different race than their own. They treated them horribly and unfairly targeted them. Unfortunately, there was little that the individuals of different races could do to defend themselves.

Fighting back against the police was a losing battle, but in Sonny's case he felt it was better to fight back than to simply be a bystander. The exact relationship between Sonny and Jim is never specified in the poem. It is never stated if Jim is Sonny's brother, cousin, or just a friend. In this way Jim is able to represent a much larger cause. Instead of being one person, Jim is representative of the entire black population of London during this time of change. He is everyone who was a target of sus policing. In the poem it is made clear that Sonny did know Jim because he previously promised his mother that he would protect Jim the best that he could. But in the grand scheme of things, Sonny could be any member of the community who is looking out for fellow members of his race. Sonny is representative of anyone who was fighting the racial injustice, anyone who was willing to fight back against the police, anyone who was willing to take a stand and was optimistic that they could make a difference. While the black citizens did not have a good relationship with the police, they had a great relationship with each other. During this time, their skin colour unified them. Their skin colour gave them a common enemy and a cause to fight for. Sonny was clearly willing to put his own safety and freedom on the line to help Jim, because it wasn't just Jim he was helping but his entire community in London. That may be another reason Sonny was okay with ending up in jail. He knew that there was another Sonny out there, another black individual that made a promise to their own mother, a promise that they would help all the Jims in their lives.

There are two relationships detailed in ' Sonny's Lettah' by Linton Kwesi Johnson. The first is the poor relationship between those of black skin colour and the London police force around the time of black migration to England.

And while the violence in the poem clearly displays the relationship between the black race and the police, Sonny's courage represents the relationship of the black community in London that is explored in this writing. Sonny had the courage to be able to stand up to a power that was much stronger than him because he knew how important it was to take a stand for himself and for people that shared his skin colour. The poem is able to represent the feelings of one race toward the police and their unfair attacks on them, while also representing the unity that the community felt during this time of need.

Bibliography

Johnson, Linton Kwesi, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems*, by Linton Kwesi Johnson (Keene, NY: Ausable Press, 2006 [2002]), pp. 25-7. [1] Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Sonny's Lettah', in *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems*, by Linton Kwesi Johnson (Keene, NY: Ausable Press, 2006 [2002]), pp. 25-7. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically within the text. [2] *Ibid*, 27-30. [3] *Ibid*, 34. [4] *Ibid*, 50-57. [5] *Ibid*, 63-64. [6] *Ibid*, 65-70.