Jay Bernard's *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry

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The name of the one that disappeared must have gotten inscribed some place else. (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 4)

What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted perhaps by the chase we are leading? (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10)

The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 36)

Introduction

Jay Bernard's "*Surge*: Side A," a stunning multi-media performance combining spoken word, song and documentary film was first performed at the Last Word Festival at the Roundhouse in Camden in 2018 and won the Ted Hughes Prize for Poetry the same year. Parts of it were later published in the critically acclaimed poetry collection *Surge* (2019). Bernard's residency at the George Padmore Institute London in 2017 allowed them (the poet's preferred pronoun[1]) to access the Institute's archives relating to black British history, an experience which proved central to the writing of many of the poems in their performed and published formats. Through poems which are often boldly innovative and experimental, yet keenly attuned to particular social and material in/exclusions within specific historical and socio-cultural contexts, Bernard constructs a "radical

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[1] Bernard described themselves as a "trans non-binary person" before their performance of "Bras" at Penguin Pride in Brighton, UK, 2018 ("Poet Jay Bernard performs 'Bras'").

excavation of black British history" ("Great New Poetry Books"). Central to this "excavation" are two notorious London-based fires: New Cross (1981) and Grenfell (2017), the victims of both of which were mainly working-class black Britons and ethnic minority subjects.

This article considers the significant contribution which *Surge* makes to the formal experimentation of black British poetry alongside its more visible political project of raising unsettling questions and issues surrounding the in/visibility, forgetting and elision of key events in black British history. There are poems in *Surge* which meditate on the nature of memory, the role of trauma, grief and dis/embodiment and the power of certain voices to trouble and to "haunt" mainstream histories. Indeed, the collection as a whole asks us to consider what it means to be haunted by a history and to "haunt it back."[2] Bernard is especially engaged with the "vexed […] relationship between public narration and private truths" (11) as they write to connect the two fires across a continuing landscape of racism, incompetence, and institutional neglect of certain communities.

In other, more introspective poems in the collection, Bernard examines the complexities of queer, black intersectional identities in Britain and their personal relation to the archive for a queer black trans subject. Drawing on theoretical insights such as Derrida's concepts of "hauntology" and "archive fever," this article argues that the notion of the archive is central to both the aesthetic and political project of *Surge*. The varied formal and aesthetic experimentation of many of the poems allow Bernard to ask some challenging questions of British society and its relation to its history in notably innovative ways. Bernard harnesses the power of poetry to queer or unsettle

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[2] This is strikingly similar to Jacques Derrida's question with which this article began: "What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always persecuted perhaps by the chase we are leading?" (*Specters of Marx* 10). Derrida is referencing *Hamlet* here and the ways in which his search for his dead father's ghost starts to "haunt" him more profoundly in terms of his dis/locatedness and his very condition of being. Bernard captures some of this sense, but with greater agency when they write in the foreword to *Surge*: "I am haunted by this history, but I also haunt it back" (xi).

other kinds of discourse (including orthodox historical narrative) by imaginatively re-embodying hitherto disembodied voices, enabling them to speak in the interstices between private memory and public history in some unique (and strikingly affecting) ways.

Writing back to black British histories: The New Cross Massacre (1981)

The New Cross Fire of January 1981, a house fire in South London which claimed the lives of 13 young people and injured 27 others, was a highly significant event in black British history, yet it is still not widely acknowledged. By taking what came to be known as the "New Cross Massacre" as a focus point in key poems in *Surge*, Bernard draws attention to the wider neglect of black British histories within a British context and the effective forgetting or silencing of certain voices (young, black British, working-class, queer, those of the dead) in dominant historical narratives. As Bernard has reflected in an interview:

> I realized that I had never heard this young woman's name before … This was a major thing that happened and she'd never been mentioned. While I was at school we learned about the Anglo-Saxons. We learned about Henry VIII and all the wives he murdered but we never learned anything to do with our own communal history. You know, I grew up in South London: how had I never heard of this person ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard")?

"This person" was Yvonne Ruddock, whose sixteenth birthday was being celebrated at a house party at 439 New Cross Road when the fire broke out. The fire's cause has never been conclusively proven, but it is believed to have been the result of a racially motivated hate crime. One particularly upsetting line of police inquiry at the time was that the fire may have started within the house as a result of conflict between the partygoers themselves. However, it was the brutal and insensitive treatment of survivors and grieving relatives by the London Metropolitan Police, as well as perceptions of a rushed investigation and marked inconsistencies in the subsequent inquiry, which caused the most anger and distress to those involved and their immediate community.

Within days the New Cross Action Committee (NCAC) was set up as a community-based activist organisation designed to support and coordinate legal representation for the bereaved families, and to protest at the "media bias and police mishandling of the police investigation into the fire."[3] Amongst the founding members of the NCAC were key cultural figures of the time, such as black activist and independent publisher John La Rose and dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. Bernard includes tributes to both in the form of using some of La Rose's words from the archive and bases a whole poem ("Songbook") in tribute to "New Crass Massakah" (1981), Linton Kwesi Johnson's iconic poem of the time. Such intertextual use of these earlier British-Caribbean figures provides the poems in *Surge* with a historical grounding and connection to a longer humanistic revisionary strain in Caribbean British writing. This is important in terms of Bernard's location of their work within a specifically black British history. Bernard also pays tribute to the cultural importance of dub poetry and the wider musical landscape of 1980s black Britain (such as Sound System culture and the reggae deejays - which the title "Side A" references), as well as citing the stylistic influence of a range of black transatlantic writers from Aime Césaire and C.L.R. James to the more recent work of 2015 Booker-Prize winning novelist Marlon James. In this way, a recognizable political as well as literary continuum is established which allows Bernard's poetic voices to move backwards and forwards through time and space, memory, and hope for the future.

Black British history as haunting: Grenfell (2017)

Whilst Bernard was writing the poems in *Surge*, another much more high-profile event unfolded which interrupted and complicated the writing of the collection. This was the tragedy of Grenfell

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[3] In 2011 the thirtieth anniversary of the New Cross Fire was marked with a series of events and publications, including *The New Cross Massacre Story: Interviews with John La Rose* (New Beacon), with a new introduction by Linton Kwesi Johnson.

Tower, when a fire rapidly spread through a high-rise residential building in central London killing some 72 inhabitants. Again delays, official incompetence and insensitivity surrounded the case. There were also suggestions that the responses of the police, emergency services and government ministers might have been very different had the inhabitants not been mainly working class, migrant and ethnic minority inhabitants living in one of the richest boroughs in London. There were some striking parallels between the Grenfell and New Cross fires, as Bernard suggests, not least the initial "blam[ing of] the people in the house" for the fire ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

In the preface to *Surge,* Bernard explains how in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster Padmore's New Cross archive became:

> a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history. The most chilling aspect of this was the lack of closure, the lack of responsibility and the lack of accountability at the centre of both the New Cross Fire and Grenfell. And the more I read and discussed, the more vexed the relationship between public narration and private truths appeared (11).

Whilst there are important differences between the two fires, Bernard links them within a longer black British history and reminds us of an even longer transatlantic history for black diasporic subjects. For example, in "Arrival" Bernard sensitively excavates the different historical journeys made by the ancestors of the dead, and points to the terrible inevitability - and cost - of repeatedly treating black people as statistics, from the numbered slaves to the numbered dead in a London fire. "Arrival" with its tapered, wing-like presentation of ever-shortening lines on the page "ma[kes] visible" the forgotten dead as individual human beings and provides a fitting legacy:

> Remember we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams
> that we might be named, numbered and forgotten
> that we were made visible that we might be looked on with contempt
> that they gave us their first and last names that we might be called wogs

and to their minds made flesh that it might be stripped from our backs
close our smokey mouths around their dreams
swallow them as they gaze upon us
never to be full -
snap, crackle
amen (1)

Likewise, in "Window," the fire-cornered subjects' of New Cross- Grenfell desperately jumping to their death from a window is recontextualised within a longer history of death by fire, as the poem's unnamed, ghostly speaker remembers witnessing a young (slave?) boy defying death before being burned alive and imagines him taken home to "the gully where he was born [...] taken…into the house before seeing / that he was half smoke, that he had been floating away" (Bernard 19). Such are the ghosts of a transatlantic history which haunts *Surge.* Both poems are good examples of what Derrida calls "hauntology," a term he originally coined in *Specters of Marx* (1993). As Edyta Lorek-Jezińska suggests, discussing Derrida:

> Hauntology… derives its meaning from the combination of the verb "to haunt" and the word "ontology" to signify the extent to which the sense of being is always haunted by something other that makes it impossible to describe, comprehend or enclose existence in definite categories (Lorek-Jezińska 7).

According to Mark Fisher, Derrida argues that:

> the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What [is mourn[ed] is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality. (Fisher 16)

 Thus, on the "question of repetition" (here of history), "the specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins [paradoxically] by coming back" (Derrida 11). Perhaps the most obvious example of haunting and spectrality in *Surge* is "Duppy," a poem named for the Caribbean word for a ghost or a spirit which haunts the human world. In this

remarkable poem, a victim of the New Cross fire witnesses from beyond the grave her community's activism in the form of the Black People's Day of Action of March 1981. Here the disembodied voice of the duppy referenced in the title sees:

> Everyone I know [...]
> Cracked puddle reflects the procession
> Rude boys moody like the underside of clouds [...]
>
> I see my picture on a sign my name
> As though the march
> Were my mother's mantelpiece Lewisham, the frame
> Every face come in like a cousin
> Tall boys carry my empty coffin[4] (Bernard 22)

In a meeting of form and content in the poem the "cracked puddle" reflection is mirrored in the fragmented and irregular spacing of words and overall form of "Duppy." When the poem's voice notes "the crowd passes through me," the kind of spectrality which is produced is both intertextual (for example, after the "crowd flow[ing] over London Bridge" in the "Unreal City" section of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) and hauntological. We can also see how disembodiment lies at the heart of this haunting when the voice asks: "No-one will tell me what happened to my body" (Bernard 22). The poem is also hauntological in that the subject's future is now virtual, imagined rather than actual, constantly haunting the "present." It is this future, as much as the fact of the subject's death which is mourned. The "work of mourning", as Derrida reminds us, "is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general" (*Specters of Marx* 97).[5]

"Archive Fever"

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[4] The coffin is "empty" because there are not enough human remains left by the fire to fill it.
[5] "Mourning always follows a trauma. I have tried to show elsewhere that the work of mourning is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production…" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 45).

Bernard's use of the George Padmore Institute's archive is the overarching organizing principle of *Surge.* This archive has an interesting, if not unique, provenance in being gifted by one individual: black activist and independent publisher, John La Rose. It includes audio, visual and written texts "relating predominantly to the experience of the black community in Britain and internationally, especially in the Caribbean […] supplemented by material from Africa and Asia [...] the majority covering the period 1960s-1990s" (George Padmore Institute). Community-based from the outset, the archive provided Bernard with a radically different history of Britain to the one promoted in their own school textbooks and the media. Bernard reflects on their methodology in using these documentary sources to write many of the poems in *Surge*:

> When you go to an archive or you look at a particular history there's an expectation of reportage, that you're going to take on the position of the journalist[...] [I was] kind of wanting to actively react against that actually[...]so maybe wanting to flirt with that a little bit, but poetry is a kind of truth and it's in language that is restorative rather than sensationalist. It's so important that we don't let the key moments of our current time get only recorded by journalists, by the media[...]It can't be the only thing that we seek out to find information [...]I don't think poetry is "information" as such but I do think it's useful to think about the degraded nature of the language, the degradation of the discourse when there's something better that people have spent time on [poetry], that's actually good for you ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

Bernard's notion of poetry as something "good for you" is striking here, as is the idea of the "degraded language" of journalism and the poetic archive working against that. Re/turning to the archives seems both a political and aesthetic restorative process for Bernard, one which guards against the sensationalist and linguistically "degraded" and degrading discourse used in media coverage of the same events.

Derrida's concept of "archivilogy" is a useful one in any critical reading of *Surge,* given the centrality of the archive to Bernard's project (with poems titled "Ark" and "Ark II") and the poet's focus on the *idea* of the archive as well as the individual's poetic use of a specific archive

of black British history. This interest in the archive is very much in line with a wider contemporary "archival turn" in the Humanities and beyond - what Derrida famously terms "Archive Fever" in his book of the same name. Derrida "considers the role and meaning of archiving and archives, in which he includes all texts, writing and forms of duplication, printing, e-mail, and so on in human history" (qtd. in Tyacke 16). Derrida argues that writing is a form of archiving and archiving a form of writing. Victoria Adukwei Bulley captures something of Derrida's sense of archiving when she argues that *Surge* is effectively "a ledger of injustice and resistance, a book of haunting and disquiet" (Bulley). By "archive fever" Derrida is also concerned with "human-kind's desire to archive or to have memory which [...] is inseparable from the capacity to 'forget' either wilfully or naturally over time [...] in archival terms he sees this "forgetting" translated into the activities of deliberately destroying or keeping records and archives secret from others or even losing them in the course of time" (Tyacke, 16).

However, beyond such specific contexts, the wider concept of the archive remains a slippery one. It is rooted in the slippage in English between the meanings of "archive" as a repository, "archive'" as the physical place where records are stored, "archive" as the totality of these records more generally (e.g., the archive of slavery) and "archive" as a process of filing and recording which necessarily involves selection from a wider body of documentation and thus necessary exclusion and/or potential erasure or destruction of certain records. As Sarah Tyacke notes:

> the word "Record" is the older established term from the medieval period onwards and meant a report or evidence. Classical Latin "recordor" to recall, remember, ponder over. "Archive" was the place where records were kept and in England dates from the mid-seventeenth century…. the medieval Latin word "arca" … was a chest or trunk, as in "arks and hutches" of the Treasury of receipt in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries… In the French tradition, the word "archives" means records from creation to archiving, as we in England use the words "record" or "archive" interchangeably to cover the continuum (4).

Jacques Derrida usefully opens *Archive Fever*, his study of the role of new technologies on the human mind and memory, with an examination of the etymology of "archive":

> As in the case from the Latin *archivum* or *archium* (a word that is use in the singular, as was the French *archive*, formerly employed as a masculine singular: *un archive*), the meaning of "archive"), the meaning of "archive", its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house (private house, family house, or employer's house), that official documents are filed (2).[6]

Significantly "the archons are first of all documents' guardians":

> They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law. To be guarded thus, in the jurisdiction of this speaking the law, they needed at once a guardian and a localization. Even in their guardianship or their hermeneutic tradition, the archives could do neither without substrate nor without residence. It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret (2-3).

In poems such as "Ark" we see the speaker plays with the idea of themselves as a kind of archon or guardian of the archive. However, I want to suggest that Bernard's positionality is altogether more ambivalent: both within and outside of the house, the "domiciliation" of the archive (George Padmore Institute), which they had been granted access to for a finite period of time. That ambivalence unsettles the idea of archivism and the power of its archons or guardians.

As the subtitle of his *Archive Fever* suggests, Derrida is writing here about a specific archive: that of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. He is particularly interested in the nomological and topological transition of this private "archive" to the public access to his archive facilitated by the

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[6] "The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhe*. But it also *shelters* itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to sating also that it forgets it" (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 2).

establishment of the Freud Museum (appropriately enough, located in Freud's former house in London). As Derrida notes:

> With such a status, the documents [...] are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged topology. They inhabit this uncommon place. At the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate, the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible (3).

The notion of the visible and the invisible in relation to the archive and the wider sense of the archive being haunted by secrets, of ghosts taking secrets beyond the grave, also speaks to many of the poems in *Surge*.

Nichols Abraham, writing after Freud and then Lacan's famous reading of *Hamlet* argues that "The theme of the dead – who, having suffered repression by their family or society, cannot enjoy, even in death, a state of authenticity – appears to be omnipresent" (171). The dead haunt (literally or metaphorically) precisely because they "took unspeakable secrets to the grave" (Abraham 171). Such secrets may include the manner in which they died, as is the case with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Ultimately, Derrida suggests, the secret and the hidden is already inherent in the notion of the archive: it is haunted by what it cannot say or recover or account for in any coherent way.

*Surge***: Haunting as intertextuality**

Bernard also uses the term "haunting" in reference to their writing process for the collection:

> Many questions emerged not only about memory and history, but about my place in Britain as a queer black person. This opened out into a final sense of coherence: I am from here, I am specific to this place, I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back (*Surge* xi).

This search for location and locatedness is crucial as Bernard grounds their poems within particular historical events (New Cross, Grenfell) in a specifically black British context. However, as the

intertexts to many of the poems demonstrate, the poems draw upon, and can be located in a wider and thoroughly transatlantic, black Atlantic discourse. When Bernard reflects: "So much of the book is about haunting but also presence and absence" ("Jay Bernard reads 'Clearing'"), we can read this on one level as a statement about Bernard's literary influences and the central role of intertextuality in the collection. The collection references documents in the George Padmore Institute archive and reproduces both very visible archival sources, such as a "Support Black People's Day of Action" poster, and more obscure or "hidden" (because less immediately recognisable) intertexts, such as lines from the fact-finding commission conducted by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (55). This technique contributes to the reader's sense that the archive is composed of presences and absences: the archive presents material but - as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever* (1995, 1996) – the archive also hides by foregrounding particular ways of organizing and making sense of histories and not others. What we are left with is a ghostly sense of archival traces which may or may not link to an embodied, describable or even knowable history. Indeed, Judie Newman et al. have argued that intertextuality is a kind of "haunting" of one text by others. This idea of unspecified or vague intertextuality as a kind of haunting is useful as it can encompass unconscious and unintended intertextuality as well as the more straightforward intertextuality Bernard acknowledges they make in their collection.[7]

Archive/s and power

Derrida's interest in *arkheion* is in large part an interest in power, in the ways in which a relationship developed between the archive and those who governed, both being located in the same privileged space of domiciliation. The legacy of this origin is that all archives hold power,

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[7] For example, Bernard's "Notes" at the end of the collection reveal they make references in individual poems to black Atlantic writers such as Edouard Glissant, Aime Césaire (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*) and C.L.R James (*Black Jacobins)* and "Songbook" writes back to an earlier poem on New Cross by Linton Kwesi Johnson.

though not necessarily in the form which the ancient Greeks would recognise. In "Toward Slow Archives" (2019) Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson argue that:

> the structures, practices, and processes of collection, cataloguing, and curation from multiple vantage points including colonial, community-based archives, and institutional archives…expose where current cultural authority is placed, valued, and organized within archival workflows. The long arc of collecting is not just rooted in colonial paradigms; it relies on and continually remakes those structures of injustice not only through the seemingly benign practices and processes of the profession, but also through how terms like access and circulation are understood and expressed (87).

Christen and Anderson's primary interest (in this case in the context of first nation and indigenous people's histories) is in modes of decolonizing the archive. They note that:

> Recent moves in archival studies and practice have emphasized post-custodial (Sangwand 2014; Kelleher 2017) participatory (Gilliland and McKemmish 2014) and community archives (Bastian and Alexander 2009; Hennessy et al. 2013; Caswell 2014; Thorpe 2017; Cifor et al. 2018) [as all providing] modalities for upending and redirecting archives' power and structures of dominance, erasure, and authorial control (91).

Most archives are compiled according to what was deemed useful by certain individuals (archivists, collectors) in the past and are not closed in the sense that documents may be removed, added to or reconfigured in different ways. Whilst it is crucial to acknowledge that archives can act in oppressive ways by deliberately excluding certain voices (such as the voices of the colonized in colonial archives), it's also important to note that archives are not in and of themselves necessarily oppressive structures which actively seek to exclude certain groups and materials (though they may do so through unconscious and conscious bias). One example of this might be the relative dearth of working-class voices in older archives which is in part due to low literacy rates historically amongst this group. Indeed, archives are often rather haphazard in their genesis and inclusiveness. Tyaycke observes that:

The archive or record (whether current or historic) is selected, i.e., it is deliberately less than the totality, depending on the significance given by the selectors and/or the creators to the thought or activity of the creators; parts of the total record, before any process of archiving has taken place, may, of course, inadvertently be left to survive until their value is recognized by succeeding generations and the records are deemed important enough to join the archive. Even here the chances are that someone thought the documents were worth not throwing away. So, archives tend to be a mixture of deliberate selection and survival for whatever reason (9).

However, as Derrida recognises, all archives are important as sites of authority, even community-based archives such as the one Bernard uses. For Saidiya Hartman, the colonial origins of certain archives are important. Using "archive" in the sense of the total documentation on a given subject, she suggests:

The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power. [For example] the archive [may] yield [...] no exhaustive account of [an individual slave's] life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death. All the rest is a kind of fiction (10).

Although the archive of slavery is only residually drawn upon by Bernard in certain poems (e.g., "Arrival") it is still a potent trace and a powerful undertow in the collection. Resisting the kind of "founding violence" which Hartman speaks of, Bernard puts in place an "emphasis on multiplicity and relatedness [as...] an active undoing of the notion of any one "expert" or "authority" record and a simultaneous untethering of accumulated knowledge from existing collections" (Parmar). Bernard's poems in *Surge* are also important in emphasising *process* as "archival and preservation practices oftentimes emphasize an end product over the process and knowledge embedded in the materials themselves" (Parmar).

"Ark" and "Ark II": the poet as archivist

Despite their background in documentary film, Bernard chose not to adopt a "documentary" approach and instead focuses on the voices in the archive: the named and the unnamed, embodied

and disembodied, the *what* was being said and "the w/hole" of what wasn't. Sandeep Parmar argues that the use of multiple voices throughout the collection "reminds us that the self is an overlaying of multiple identities, comprised not just of what is remembered and forgotten, but of how one is located in the wider questions of belonging, memory and solidarity" (Parmar). For Bernard as a young black self-identifying trans non-binary person, these questions of belonging are even more vexed. As Bernard reflects:

> [In *Surge*] I was unpacking myself my own sense of self a little bit which I think can be dangerous and incredibly fruitful…. these poems activated a real question about what it means to be a black queer person… As I masculinize and as I start to take on a different pronoun, what does mean [sic] in relation to my history of black womanhood. How do I square that up? It was a really big hurdle I had to overcome, because it's so funny to look at a piece of history where you identify so strongly but you probably wouldn't have been welcomed there. What would this person [Yvonne Ruddock] have thought of you? So, it really changed my queer politics…it's solely about who you're attracted to. It's about the space you inhabit. So much came out of that" ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

In other words, the archive becomes valuable to the poet as one of a range of intersecting sources ("environmental, archival, technological") for understanding and locating the self. One way of thinking of the archive's value, then, is that it is valuable only in so much as it allows the subject (or the community, or the nation) to locate themselves in relation to it. This is what Parmar means when she argues that Bernard's poems in this collection, through their close relationship to a specific located archive of black British history, create "situated and place-based meaning" and give the record back to the community from which they sprung (Parmar).

In the poems "Ark" and "Ark II", one written in unrhymed couplets and the other presenting as a kind of prose poem utilizing symbols as well as letters, "Bernard draws the lyric subject into a complex relation with the past and present" (Parmar). Here it is the poet as another kind of 'archivist' who draws attention to the materiality of the archive's documents (audio and video recordings, press cuttings and photos) as well as the process of archiving itself:

> I take this morning from its box, see how the years have warped
> Its edges, its middle pages conjoined at the text.
>
> I remove the rusted paper clip, dry sponge its brittle red remains,
> Unfold a liver-spotted note in copper ink,
>
> Date it by the flaking Letraset and amber glue,
> Press each part to the flatbed scanner (2),

However, here it is not documents which are being filed but something both more elusive and visceral: "damp smoke and young bones" (2). The end of the poem reprises the process of archiving as the poet-as-archivist turns to matters of identity and national belonging:[8]

> I take this January morning in my hands and wonder if it should go under London, England,
> Britain, British, black-British –

However, hardest of all to file is the often-hidden history of racism, violence and brutality as experienced by individuals:

> where to put the burning house, the child made ash, the brick in the back of the neck, the shit
> in the letter box and piss up the side of it?
> I file it under fire, corpus, body, house (3).

The final line of the poem reminds us that one of the original meanings of archive in Ancient Greek, is home, a place where the archive is located, a body of documents but also a place of domiciliation, of domestic locatedness, a home made unhomely by traumatic events.

As Parmar argues, "Ark" constitutes "weav[ing] the fragility of the archive's contents with an expanded definition of the archive itself":

> [it is] a body of knowledge that is housed and organized according to the inclusive and
> exclusive laws of provenance and belonging. Where, the poet asks, does the body sit across
> the categorisations of national, local and ethnic identities if the traumas of personal and
> systemic violence make being at home impossible? The fire becomes an existential threat

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[8] One important permutation of the archive is as a set of records which signify as markers of cultural nationalism.

beyond this historical moment, and the ephemera lovingly preserved in the archive become an ark in the flood of time (Parmar).

Here, most clearly, the meanings of "Ark" and 'archive' collide: one is the means of preserving living bodies against the deluge of a watery flood, the other a means of preserving a body of knowledge against the ravages of time. As Derrida suggests, even the term "Ark" is hidden within the archive in the form of its etymology as *arkheion* (*Archive Fever*, 2-3). Again the sense of what is hidden within the archive is foregrounded.

"Ark II" is a fragmented prose poem in the speaking voice which tries to connect the past with the present within a London topography. Like other poems in this collection, it weaves personal recollection with public history, the man who claims to be the official "underpath artist" set against New Cross and Grenfell. The poem is, in many ways, about the process of memorialization, how we remember and memorialize the past in certain ways. However, the poem is also centrally about narration and different narrative modes, as the voice suggests:

> In the story I am trying to tell/ what doesn't fit is part of the hole[...]the story lives in the house/in a video the anchor pulls the curtains closed on a reconstructed morning/ [...] a friend sends me the link to the burning tower effigy[9]/ in the 80s people sent letters[...] the columns read; [7 heart symbols]/ STRENGTH (46)

Beyond the archive as mortuary: embodiment and voice

Saidiya Hartman suggests that "to read the archive [...] is to enter a mortuary" (4); it is to connect with the lives and the words of the dead. This is true of specific poems in *Surge*. For instance, in "Clearing" and "-" the dead speak from the police mortuary in counterpart to the voices of the living and the voices of the families in the paired poem "+". Crucially, in this collection to be dead

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[9] "Ark II" references a BBC article from 3 November 2015 as well as the infamous Grenfell Tower "bonfire" effigy video which emerged and was circulated on social media in Autumn 2018.

does not mean one is voiceless or silenced. African-American writer Tracy K. Smith in conversation with Bernard in 2019 argued for the idea of "voice being alive and ongoing, history still breathing and generating something new that we can listen to if we choose to. We need to listen to these people [in this context the imagined voice of unnamed slaves in an old photograph] because what they're saying makes urgent sense." Smith stresses the important "role of silence and rhythmic momentum [in poetry, which acts to] urge us out of understanding into something deeper than that[...]we don't do that enough" ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard"). This is also Bernard's method in *Surge* as they work through different voices, embodied and disembodied, real and imagined, whilst listening for the elisions and silences in the record, the "hole" in the whole. This is represented variously as the deliberate typographical spacing between words (as in "Harbour," "Duppy" and "Stone"), as redaction ("Ark II") and as omission of names ("Blank").

Significantly, as Bulley suggests, *Surge* starts with the word "Remember;" and ends with the repeated refrain "Will anybody speak of this" (Bulley)? So many of the poems in between start with the word "said," "heard," "sound" or "voice" and the dialogic relationship between speaking and listening is central to many of the poems. Sometimes, as in "Patois", voice is inflected with the socio-linguistic particularities of what is known as "London Jamaican English." However, the fact that it is "three Asian boys" who remind its speaker of the language used in their British Jamaican home, reminds us of the dangers of essentialising any voice or identity:

This century dubbed by migrants from the last.
We do not speak with one voice about one thing
Below the yellow, black and green flag of England (4).

In the next poem "Harbour" the voice seems to be that of a witness to the fire, a voice "so weak, so sickened / so grieved." by what they can see that they say:

to the child I knew
harboured in the fire –jump

Yvonne, jump Paul, jump-
And I said to my god I knew
Harboured in the fire – jump (6).

Importantly, the use of the names of actual victims grounds the poem in a lived reality, the very opposite of a later poem "Blank" in which all proper names are left blank. The repetition of "jump" evokes the simplicity of a children's skipping rope game but the injunction is deadly serious and tragic in consequence. Even the gently arcing shape of the poem on the page ironically echoes the arc of a safe harbour and the imminent life-threatening jump from a burning building which is described here.

In the first of two poems called "Songbook" the central concept of voice and the sonic properties of poetry really come into their own. "Songbook" in performance (Bernard performs "Songbook") is sung rather than spoken and has a dancehall or mento rhythm appropriate to its opening description of the New Cross party before the fire. Bernard has said that the poem is inspired by Linton Kwesi Johnson's "New Crass Massakah" (55) and traces of this earlier poem are certainly present here in terms of a shared British-Caribbean musical aesthetic, the centrality of voice and the devastating subject matter. However, it also uses the quatrain form so beloved of other Jamaican poets such as the legendary Louise Bennett. Bernard's use of the quatrain echoes the innocence of the nursery rhyme form or the familiarity of the hymn form, now undermined and given traumatic new meaning. Parmar suggest both "Songbook" poems in the collection ("Songbook" and "Songbook II") "draw on musical forms associated with transatlantic black culture and civil rights [...] from celebratory reggae to the revolutionary anthems of race equality that would follow that fateful night" (Parmar). Bernard has spoken about the poem originating out of their father's love of creating rhythmically repetitive songs like this and his love of reggae and

1980s' sound system culture ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard"). "Songbook II" makes use of a ballad-like repetitive structure and focuses on "Miss D," a former community stalwart and now a grieving mother of one of the New Cross victims. The "call and response" format of the poem suggests a longer black Atlantic cultural connectedness but also achieves immense poignancy in pairing the sing-song rhythm with trauma and loss. As in the first "Songbook" poem, the form of "Songbook II" lulls us into the traumatic subject matter at the heart of the poem.

> I haven't seen her, nor have you
> Not since the fire at 439
> I heard her daughter was gone for days
> They wouldn't let her see the remains (31)

As in so many of the poems in *Surge,* "Songbook II" plays on presence and absence. In its repeated, almost antiphonal exchanges, Miss D transitions from an active member or agent in the community to the subject of local gossip and mythology:

> How many times has Miss D died?
> As often as there have been babies born
> How many times will she die once more?
> As long as things are worth dying for [...]
>
> And she came up in the morning
> And she went down in the evening
> And when I turn around she was gone (31).

Later poems in the collection such as "Chemical" and "Blank" echo some of the most viscerally disturbing poems of New Cross's aftermath ("Hiss" and "Washing") in reminding us of the horror of death by fire. Bernard utilises the convention of blanking out individual names in their poetic account of Grenfell, thereby showing how certain kinds of discourse can enact another kind of disembodiment and dehumanisation of the victims and participants. A key cause of this

depersonalization, the poet suggests, is the "degraded," soulless, official language used by the media and other agencies in such cases:

> The family of------------- today issued this statement -
> The family of -------------ask for your respect -
> Organisers hope to deliver the petition to the Home Secretary.
> It has nothing to do with us today issued this statement:
> Those involved have defended their actions and been given/
> Been given/ acquitted/retired with full pay/charged/acquitted/
> Desk duty/retired with full pay/been given/been given (49)

By not just replicating but intensifying this journalistic language, Bernard makes the point that the victims – as in New Cross – were all individuals with individual stories to tell, not homogenised victims or numbers. The poem's close features language pared down to a very few words which tell us everything as well as nothing specific about individual victims:

> I read that you were loved, I read that you were -
> I read about you --------, I read that you were – (41)

The overall effect of this poem is to suggest that language itself has broken down in the face of trauma.

Hartman's reflections on her own writing process in relation to an archive of black Atlantic slavery are worth quoting at length, as they seem very similar to Bernard's project in *Surge*:

> As a writer [...] I have endeavoured to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known. For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom [...] As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state [...] as the anticipated future of this writing. This writing is personal because this history has engendered me, because "the knowledge of the other marks me," because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive, and because of the kinds of stories I have fashioned to bridge the past and the present and to dramatize the production of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste. What are the kinds of stories to be told (13-14)?

As Bernard has said of their aim in *Surge*:

> [I was] not so much trying to speak on behalf of, or for these people that I [...] came across at the archive but through and with and at the same time as [...]I think it's really like an exercise in humanity. It's that simple. It cannot be commodified [...]. The material really came alive for me [in the archive and] I started to see the City not just as socio -political thing but also as an embodied thing too…" ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard")

Despite such similarities, what distinguishes Bernard's poetry from Hartman's writing is its insistence on a black British context and a thoroughly black British (rather than Black Atlantic) aesthetic. In this respect, Bernard's experience as a film programmer for the British Film Institute and as a documentary film maker is relevant. Unsurprisingly, Bernard has acknowledged a number of black British films and filmmakers as key influences on their work, including John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Collective, best known for the seminal 1986 film *Handsworth Songs*.[10] Films like *Handsworth Song*s construct alternative micro-narratives of British history through techniques such as montage and sampling and ask what stories get told in the media. As such they form part of a parallel history of black British postmodern archival play that, like Bernard's work, proves ultimately emancipatory. Fisher has suggested that *Handsworth Songs* is also characterised by certain hauntological aspects:

> When the BAFC's 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* was shown at Tate Modern in the wake of the English riots in the summer of 2011, Akomfrah posed a question about hauntological causality—what is it about certain places, such as Tottenham, which means that riots keep happening? How, when the whole population of an area has changed, do such repetitions occur? *Handsworth Songs* can be read as a study of hauntology, of the specter of race itself (an effective virtuality if ever there was one), an account of how the traumas of migration (forced

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[10] In their LRB conversation with Tracy K. Smith Bernard references Reece Auguiste's *Twilight in the City* ([BFI 1989) as an "incredible film, an important documentary about Britain, race, sexuality – all of that. And watching that [was] incredibly interesting and useful in understanding how I put my own work together and also the work of someone like John Akomfrah. He's got the notion of the pen and how does it jump which is so key in ordering my poems [...] In terms of thinking about what is missed out and what we [...] fill in with that as well [...] and I think poems can…do that" ("Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard").

and otherwise) play themselves out over generations, but also about the possibilities of rebellion and escape (24).

When Fisher notes *Handsworth Songs*' "experimental essayistic form, driven as much by [its]… sound design as by the images" and its "sampling of archive sources such as BBC radio's production of *Under Milk Woo*d and documentary images of Caribbean immigrants arriving in Britain" we can see some parallels to Bernard's project, not in any simplistic or derivative way, but as part of a shared stream of black British artistic experimentation and innovation. Both texts use sampling and complex forms of intertextuality; both texts foreground formal experimentation as well as – in their different ways – the sonic dimensions of the text.

Ultimately *Surge* reflects upon and re-historicizes a longer continuum of black British history. The collection:

> speaks to the continuum on which both the New Cross Fire and Grenfell fires exist – an ongoing chain of events marked by moments such as the Macpherson Report, the London Riots of 2011, and [from 2018 on] the Home Office deportations of Windrush-era elders who arrived in the UK as citizens. It is a mirror held carefully up to our current age, armed with the transgressive fluidities of black queer selfhood. (Bulley)

Central to *Surge'*s formal experimentation is Bernard's use of voice, and its hauntological role in unsettling and transcending not only the archive but, in a sense, death itself. In *Surge*, even the unnamed victims of the New Cross and Grenfell fires achieve a kind of immortality, albeit a restless and unsettled one. That is Bernard's point: that history continues to haunt and be haunted until there is some form of justice, resolution or closure for the living *and* the dead. As Bulley observes: "the voices across *Surge* converge, creating a collage – at times a chorus – of utterances reflecting the experiences of black people at the hands of the British state" and cannot be enclosed within a linear timeline. In such ways, Bernard's poetry and filmmaking moves beyond singular

or sedimenting ways of thinking about black British pasts and suggests newly mobile ways of thinking about both the materiality of a black British archive and its hauntological spectres.

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