

Review

‘I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back’: two poetry collections

Kate Potts

Jay Bernard, *Surge*, Chatto and Windus 2019

David Cain, *Truth Street*, Smokestack Books 2019

What does it mean to tell the truth in a poem or a work of literature or art? Keats tells us, in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’: only art can convey the realities and complexities of human experience. But we tend to consider poetic truth - and ‘poetic license’ - as far removed from the supposedly more literal truths of government legislation, police reports, witness statements, historical archives. Artistic disruption, re-presentation and reworking of documentary ‘truth’ becomes more necessary where systems of government, law and media representation fail us. From Eric Bentley’s *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* (1973), which dramatises testimony to Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee, to Svetlana Alexievich’s many monumental polyphonic texts, Jeremy Deller’s re-enactment piece *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), and Claudia Rankine’s testimonies of everyday racism in *Citizen* (Penguin 2014), these hybrid approaches continue to evolve.

Much of the material for Jay Bernard’s *Surge* began as a writer in residence project

Review

at the George Padmore Institute, a library, education centre and archive of black political and cultural activism in Stroud Green, London. The book recounts, reworks and reimagines, in response to archive material, the New Cross fire of 1981 in which thirteen young black people were killed. There's a sense of slippage and cross-fertilisation between *Surge's* multiple voices and registers, and between historical moments; Bernard's residency period saw the Grenfell Tower disaster and the breaking of the Windrush scandal. Where does archive material end and imaginative response begin? Bernard's introductory 'Author's Note' suggests an intentional questioning of boundaries around history and memory, public and private truths, past and present:

The archive became, for me, a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history ... And the more I read and discussed, the more vexed the relationship between public narration and private truths appeared ... 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 (pxi).

The text of *Surge* is informed by interviews conducted by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee around the New Cross fire and the subsequent Black People's Day of Action and Brixton uprising, and by photos, audio and film material from this time. In response, Bernard turns archivist, curating, creating and evolving new material. *Surge* contains the voices of archivist, poet, the dead of the New Cross fire and their relatives, protestors, community members ... There are photos from the George Padmore archive, as well as a text message, and a quote from a *Newsnight* interview about Grenfell. As in Anne Carson's elegy for her brother, *Nox* (New Directions 2009), the inclusion of documentary material signals veracity and shifts 'personal' truth into a broader, more public context. More than this, Bernard's poetic archiving insists that these documented moments and 'personal' experiences are deeply political; they must be paid attention to, and kept alive through re-engagement.

Surge began life as *Surge: Side A*, a performance piece. Its concern with sound and voice still sings through in the virtuoso variety of register, tone and form. The language is intimate, spare, and often heartbreakingly direct. 'Arrival' sharply mirrors

Soundings

biblical origin narratives in its syntax:

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
kept hungry that we might cry in our children's sleep
close our smoky mouths around their dreams
(p1)

In 'Ark' an archivist considers the difficulties of documentation, classification and categorisation:

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

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*
(p3)

The best of these poems pay close attention, through lineation and space on the page, to the rhythms and textures of individual and collective voice. On 'Songbook 1' and 'Songbook 2' Bernard uses Patois, dub poetry traditions and tight rhythm, rhyme and repetition to create more overarching, balladesque narrative and commentary: 'Me seh black smoke ah billow at di house in New Cross/ Me seh blood a goh run for di pain of di loss' (p9). In contrast, the fractured, desperate voice in 'Harbour' is surrounded by the blank space of what can't be spoken:

my voice it was weak,

so sickened, so grieved -

my voice became glass
breaking in heat
(p5)

Review

But *Surge* is not only invocation or requiem; it's also an exploration and statement of Bernard's identity, their place in Britain 'as a queer black person'. When it comes to re-presented and contested histories, where you're speaking from matters. As with the recent work of US poets Solmaz Sharif and Layli Long-Soldier, which also draws on, disrupts and reworks 'official' or authoritative history and definition, the poet is firmly in the picture in *Surge*. Bernard echoes contemporary anthropological approaches through which exploration and knowledge of where you're speaking from is essential to avoid imperialist notions of absolute objectivity or universalism. In 'Pride' this 'I' is rich with discovery and possibility:

am I the steaming black street, am I the banner and the band, the crush,
lilting ale, tipsy hug, charged flesh and open eye
(p43)

The body is present and speaking on its own terms, as a means of defiance and of celebration.

David Cain's *Truth Street*, which tells the story of the Hillsborough stadium disaster through material taken from evidence given at the Second Inquest between 2014 and 2016, reveals a very different approach. There are depressing similarities, though, in the testimony of survivors of the two tragedies. In *Truth Street* the fatal crushing of fans on the terraces is first misinterpreted as hooliganism, a pitch invasion: 'The call for a fleet of ambulances comes approximately 2 minutes and 40 seconds after the request for dogs' (p37). Police attempt to deflect blame by suggesting fans were drunk and violent and the *Sun* colludes with its notorious frontpage story (headline: 'THE TRUTH') of fans picking the pockets of the dead and beating up police. As with the New Cross fire, realities of systemic power and violence cannot be borne by those in authority: the response is to either avoid engaging or to demonise, dehumanise and blame the victims.

Cain's narrative is divided into four sections or 'acts': 'The Afternoon', 'The Evening', 'After', and then 'Hold your head up high', a litany of the 96 dead. The text consists, as far as we're aware, only of testimony. Cain stands back and lets the unnamed chorus of curated voices speak. Line breaks and white space draw attention to the rhythm, repetitions and idiosyncrasies of everyday, often colloquial language. This is not conventional poetic style with its heightened imagery and whittled,

Soundings

condensed lines. But in this re-framing of evidence as poetry there's a validation of these voices, and a re-imagining of what poetry might be, and might be for:

Everything turned white.

There was a police lady

And I felt her touching my face with her fingers

Through the small holes of the fence

She had her fingers trying to prick me on the cheek saying,

'Hang on, you're strong, get through this'

(‘Everything went Peaceful’, p36)

Despite the absence of an explicit authorial voice there is palpable rage - and outrage - in this re-presentation, and a determined insistence that the survivors be heard, seen, and witnessed on their own terms:

I'm witnessing these people collapsing,

So traumatised at what they've just been told and what they've just found out,

And then, all of a sudden to my right there was just this massive scuffle
The media had got in.

(‘I remember being in this room with all these strangers’, p61)

‘Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield decides to tell the truth’ emphasises, in carefully measured words, the power of language - both what's said and what's omitted: ‘What I didn't say/ I didn't say/ ‘I have authorised the opening of the gates’ (p72). As a countering of particular, very public lies about the Hillsborough tragedy, *Truth Street* is more concerned with more traditional and confined notions of historical veracity and testimony than *Surge*, whose focus broadens into understandings of identity and place. There is, though, a very similar insistence on the witnessing of grief:

Review

I put my arms around this most beautiful, precious child
And a love that I had never experienced before surged out of me for him
When he died, a part of me also died
(‘The 96’, p74)

In a ‘post-truth’ era these reworkings of, and responses to, archive material offer no easy answers to the failures of systems of government, media and the law to witness and learn from uncomfortable truths. Both *Surge* and *Truth Street* offer, though, in different ways, not just counter-histories but explorations and re-imaginings of what truth and history might usefully mean in twenty-first century Britain, and how such knowledge can be passed on and kept alive. How do we navigate ‘the repetition of history’? Harking back to the pre-literate function of the oral epic as collective repository of cultural knowledge, the voices in these texts refuse to be misappropriated, co-opted, misrepresented, or un-bodied; they demand to be witnessed and remembered.

Kate Potts’s second poetry collection *Feral* (Bloodaxe 2018) sets out to explore and trouble the boundary between animal and human. She teaches creative writing at Middlesex University, Royal Holloway and The Poetry School.