

Borderlands

Performative Acts Across Language,
Culture and Media

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Kathrin Hettrich & Leslie Fried (eds.)

 books

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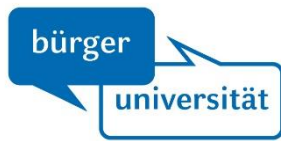
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Jay Bernard and the Angel of History

I was the first to come to England and when I arrived, I knew –
I knew – something had happened to me – I knew that what I saw
in the mirror had been darkened, differently arranged –

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[Özlem Dagdelen:] Welcome to the podcast series *Borderlands: Performative Acts Across Language, Culture and Media*.

[Mandy Bartesch:] We are master students at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, and we started working on this podcast project in the course of a seminar that explored performances that engage with thresholds and boundaries of all sorts: spatial boundaries, gendered boundaries, community boundaries, boundaries created on the basis of racialized ascriptions etc. We also explored how these performances, or performative acts, cross boundaries themselves, in trying to find the right language or the right medium to tackle their complex subject matter.

[ÖD:] Today, we are going to talk about something that happened in Britain not too long ago. Don't worry, it is not Brexit again. Though it is a political issue we want to talk about. Have you ever heard about the Windrush Scandal? No? Well, we had not heard about it either, until we read Jay Bernard's poetry collection *Surge* and stumbled upon their mentioning of said scandal. So, out of curiosity we set to work to find out more about it and in the process, we found ourselves presented with a lot more questions than answers. One topic triggered the next and we were going in wider and wider circles researching a range of interwoven issues all concerned with questions of movement, of migration and of home and belonging. Just like Jay Bernard states in one of their poems in *Surge*, we found ourselves going one step forward and two steps back. So, today we want to share with you what we found out. First of all, Mandy is going to explain what the Windrush Scandal is all about, what caused it and who was affected in what way. Then I am going to introduce Walter Benjamin's »Theses on the Philosophy of History,« which is also known as »On the Concept of History.« Afterwards we will get to talk more about Jay Bernard's work and how that ties in with the Windrush Scandal and Walter Benjamin's theses. So, the Windrush Scandal: In order to understand what this is about, you first need to know who the Windrush generation is.

The Windrush Scandal

[MB:] The Windrush generation are migrants who came from the British colonies after World War II in order to fill in labor shortages in the UK. The term also applies to anyone who came to Britain from Commonwealth countries before 1973. The Windrush generation is named after the ship MV Empire Windrush, which docked in Tilbury on the 22nd of June 1948, bringing 492 workers and their families from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean countries to the UK. The term »Windrush generation« only applies to those who came before 1973 because in 1971 a new law, the Immigration Act, was passed, which ruled that anyone with a British passport arriving in the UK after the year of its commencement could only settle there with both a work permit and proof of a parent or grandparent being born in the UK. When the Immigration Act came into effect, any citizen already living in the UK was granted indefinite leave to remain. However, the Home Office kept no record of those granted leave to remain and issued no official paperwork to them.

And here is where the scandal begins. All these people had built their lives in the UK and had been living there for about 40 years, most of them arriving as children on their parents' passports, when in 2012 Theresa May, who was Home Secretary at the time, decided to tighten the laws on »illegal immigration.«² She implemented the so called »hostile environment policies,« which aimed at making the UK unlivable for undocumented migrants and ultimately push them to just leave. So, in order to rent a flat, find a new job or apply for social benefits and the sort, paperwork now had to be submitted that worked as evidence that the person applying did indeed possess British citizenship.

You can probably see where this is going, right? The Home Office provided the Windrush generation with no such evidence. Anyone from the Windrush generation who did not travel and therefore never needed a passport did not have official paperwork that would count as evidence. The Home Office also destroyed a fair number of landing cards belonging to Windrush migrants in 2010. For those of you who do not know what that is: A landing card—also known as an arrival card—is a legal document filled out by passengers of international flights or voyages containing additional personal information such as the purpose of their visit. The document is usually surrendered to the responsible authorities upon arrival. Those cards could have proven for some of the Windrush migrants that they lived in the UK legally, but since they were destroyed, there was no such proof. Many Windrush migrants were thus denied healthcare, lost their jobs and homes, were wrongfully detained or even threatened with deportation because they could not produce the required papers—which of course was not their fault, they had done nothing wrong. However, whether they had done something wrong or not was not really the question, anyway. These people were being discriminated against and persecuted because they did not look or sound British enough. They were being targeted and it is fairly obvious what the reason was: plain old racism.

The matter became public and a scandal by the end of 2017, when British newspapers began reporting the government's wrongful actions of deporting citizens and denying them their rights. This ultimately led to then Home Secretary Amber Rudd resigning from her position on the 29th of April 2018. A year later, the Windrush Compensation Scheme was established and by the end of March 2020, over 1,000 people had applied for financial compensation, with 60 people receiving payments totaling about £360,000. About 15,000 claims are expected to be lodged before the application deadline in April 2023. A separate taskforce was also established to give individuals correct documentation, with more than 12,000 processed cases already since April 2018. It should however be noted that the »hostile environment policies« are still in place, despite the scandal and despite a ruling by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in November 2020 that declared these policies »unlawful.« So, although there have been some amendments, the Windrush Scandal is not really over yet.

The Windrush Scandal is unique to this specific group of people and the circumstances under which they arrived and lived in the UK: The children of the first post-war generation of migrants from the Caribbean who came to the »mother country« in order to help rebuild the infrastructure, the NHS, public transport and so on, as witnesses of that generation continue to emphasize.³ But the Windrush Scandal is also symptomatic of a process that has recurred time and again throughout history: the singling out and Othering of a group that is defined by dominant forces in a society as »deviant« and whose belonging is thus called into question. This brings us to the case of the philosopher Walter Benjamin who, like the poet Jay Bernard, engaged with the implications of history.

Walter Benjamin's »Theses on the Philosophy of History«

[ÖZ:] So, who is Walter Benjamin? Walter Benjamin was a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic and essayist. He was associated with the Frankfurt School, and wrote on cultural movements such as German idealism, Romanticism, Western Marxism and Jewish mysticism. Decades after his death in 1940, his writings and thoughts gained popularity. In the mid-fifties, Theodor W. Adorno presented a collection of Walter Benjamin's essays to German audiences. And he was rediscovered in the U.S. following Hannah Arendt's edition of his essays for American readers in the late sixties and became renowned worldwide. He is known for his eclectic style of thinking and his writings influenced and contributed to aesthetic theory, literary criticism and historical materialism.

Before talking about his »Theses on the Philosophy of History,« I just want to briefly tell you this about his death because I think it is important for us to understand the atmosphere of his days and how it shaped his thinking. Moreover, I also believe that it can be related to the situation of the Windrush Scandal and Jay Bernard's poems.

In 1940, Benjamin took his life at the age of 48 while fleeing from the invading armed forces of Nazi Germany. For almost ten years before his suicide, he had lived in exile in many places around Europe, mostly in Paris. On a side note, Paris was the inspiration for his uncompleted work *The Arcades Project – Das Passagen-Werk*, in which he studies 19th century Parisian life. In earlier chapters of his life, he had considered moving to Palestine but always remained hesitant to do so. He had already been aware of the anti-Semitism in Germany by that time. According to Arendt, for the Jews of Benjamin's generation, the available forms to fight against it were either Zionism or Communism. Benjamin was interested in both for years. However, he did not want to be fully involved in either of those movements in order to keep the distance that was necessary for his critical perspective. And we can say that he did not want to be labeled as a Zionist by immigrating to Palestine although he always considered this option.⁴ Similarly, as Arendt states, he was also hesitant to go to the US where »people would probably find no other use for him than to cart him up and down the country to exhibit him as the ›last European.«⁵ He finally got a Spanish transit visa with the help of the Institute for Social Research in New York to go to Portugal and then sail to the US. On the 25th of September 1940, when a small group of refugees including Benjamin arrived in the French-Spanish border town Port Bou, they found out that Spain closed the border the same day and they had to return to France. Benjamin did not have the option to go back, because his apartment in Paris had already been confiscated by the Gestapo. He took his life that night, and his suicide caused the border officials to allow his companions to go through the next day. As Arendt comments, »one day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later he would have known that it was impossible to pass through Spain.«⁶ And one could not help but agree with Arendt on that matter, when she says, »only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible.«⁷

»Theses on the Philosophy of History« was Benjamin's last major work. His eclectic style is obvious in this piece of work as well. It consists of twenty short paragraphs that have a highly fragmented, aphoristic form. These twenty theses present a critique of historicism and show how historical materialism can be the redemption of humanity—if applied properly. For this purpose, he offers an alternative way of viewing the past that enables a better present and a better future. He claims that true history can be learned from the »struggling, oppressed class,«⁸ not from the stories of victors or rulers. A better future for the working class can only be achieved by remembering the past, by »call[ing] in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers,«⁹ by keeping the image of enslaved ancestors alive rather than the image of liberated grandchildren. But it is obviously easier said than done. We believe that in *Surge*, Jay Bernard undertakes this difficult task by going through the archives during their creative process leading up to their poetry collection. We can say that *Surge* is Jay Bernard's attempt to do what Benjamin suggested in his theses.

Surge and the Angel of History

[MB:] As mentioned above, we stumbled across the Windrush scandal when reading Jay Bernard. Bernard published their poetry collection *Surge* in 2019. They were mostly inspired by the New Cross Fire: In 1981, a fire broke out at a teenager's birthday party. In the »Author's Note« right at the beginning of their book, Jay Bernard gives detailed information on the fire and its aftermath. As they explain, the fire spread quickly and killed thirteen young people. It was believed to be a racist attack, but no solid proof came out of the investigation, and as you may expect, there



Black People's Day of Action, 2 March 1981 © Alamy/Tim Ring

was near silence from the government and the press. This silence led to a grand demonstration on 2nd of March 1981 that is today known as the *Black People's Day of Action*, the largest political gathering of Black people in British history until that day.

The demonstrators were criminalized by the press and Margaret Thatcher's very openly anti-migrant government, so that the Black People's Day of Action was followed by further oppression of Black British people by the police and the government, and many similar unfortunate events have brought us to the Windrush Scandal. For their book *Surge*, Jay Bernard used the archives at the George Padmore Institute, which is a research center dedicated to radical Black history in Britain, and it was during their research that the Scandal broke. Regarding their research in their own words, Bernard says in their author's note that

[m]any 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.¹⁰

Although Jay Bernard explicitly mentions the Windrush Scandal in their »Author's Note,« there was no explanation given as to what the scandal is about, unlike the New Cross Fire, which is Bernard's main inspiration. In hindsight, this is probably because at the time *Surge* was published, the scandal was still fresh in the mind of British readers, especially Black British readers, so they would have known what it was straight away.

[ÖD:] At this point, I would like to draw your attention to the most prominent figure of Benjamin's theses which is the Angel of History. Benjamin was inspired by Paul Klee's 1920 painting *Angelus Novus*. On the painting, there is a bird whose body is turned forwards and its wings are open as if it was about to take off. But its face is turned back towards the viewers while its eyes are deviated, directed beyond, and its hair is made of rolls of papyrus. You can find the Angel of History in Benjamin's ninth thesis. With his face turned toward the past, he sees one single catastrophe where we see the chain of events which is history. And this catastrophe that is



Paul Klee *Angelus Novus* (1920)

history keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed, but is pushed away and pushed forward from the catastrophe by the storm of progress.

Benjamin's description of the painting can be linked to Jay Bernard's title for their collection of works: *Surge*. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, »surge« means a sudden and great increase, or a sudden and great movement forward, for example a tidal surge.¹¹ So, metaphorically speaking, what we need to stop the inextinguishable fire that has been going on for many years for Black British people is a surge similar to Benjamin's storm of progress. But no matter how hard the surge pushes forward like the storm of progress, it also brings wreckage. And again, metaphorically speaking, Bernard acts like Benjamin's Angel of History by looking back at the past in the archives, with their eyes fixed on the catastrophe, giving voice to the dead while being pushed forward by the surge at the same time. Surge can also point here to the arrest of thought, because it is a sudden and overwhelming movement that can take us by surprise. According to Benjamin, thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but also their arrest, that is the moment that thinking stops. Since the flow of thought is always in progress, always pushing forward like the storm of progress, these moments of thought arrest bear a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past in Benjamin's own words.

Similarly, Benjamin claims that we cannot view history only as the forward-moving flow of time, or the chain of events that happen one after another. Revolutions have the power to break that flow, explode the continuum of history and set the calendars anew. But in every era, Benjamin says, the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. I think this is what ties the Windrush Scandal to the thoughts of Benjamin. According to him, »[t]radition of the oppressed teaches us that the ›state of emergency‹ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.«¹² So, what led to the scandal was already a state of emergency that we had not been aware of then, because it had been the rule, the norm, the way that things have always been. But we cannot see racism as the historical norm.

[MB:] The poem in *Surge* that seems the most strongly inspired by the fate of the Windrush victims is »Proof,« from which you heard some lines at the beginning of our podcast. In this poem, Bernard tells the story of an unnamed, »dark-skinned« immigrant that came to England aged six, but always had the nagging feeling they did not quite belong there, probably because of the racism they faced in England. Bernard describes this person as feeling like their arrival in England had darkened their appearance in the mirror and arranged it differently to the point that their parents tried to get rid of the color. The parents had come to England earlier than their child and were more accustomed to life in Britain. They bathed, scrubbed and cleaned their child with soap, then told them to go and wash their neck. This obsession of the parents to make their child look ›clean‹, i.e. not as dark, in order to better fit into British society is probably the reason why this unnamed immigrant felt as though their parents were strangers to them, »two strangers with my last name« or »two ghosts,« as Bernard puts it. The parents had thus, to a point, adopted the same racist views as the British people discriminating against their child and making them feel unwelcome. The person this unnamed migrant is most closely attached to is the grandmother that raised them in their home country. Now that they are old and close to death, they want to be with their grandmother and die in their home country, they are begging for it even, but some unspecified problem seems to be keeping them from going back.

During my research about the Windrush scandal, I read about many people affected by it who sadly died before ever receiving an apology or compensation from the British government. One of these people is Richard Stewart, who moved from Jamaica to England in 1955, when he was ten years old, to join his parents who had moved there earlier. He was informed in 2012 that he was living in Britain illegally, when he tried to apply for a passport. It took him seven years to actually receive that passport, and he was still waiting for compensation payments when he died in 2019. He had hoped that the payments would be enough to finance a trip to Jamaica to see the country he was from and visit his mother's grave. His fate sounds eerily familiar to what is happening to Bernard's unnamed character, and sadly Richard Stewart is just one of many who never got to be reimbursed by the government.

[ÖD:] From the sugar plantations to the Windrush scandal, the history of Black people is filled with the experience of oppression and trauma. It is a huge responsibility that Bernard takes up, brushing history against the grain in order to reveal what was lost, seizing the images of the past that only flashes in an instant and then is lost again. But the responsibility is also ours: to remember the past, to keep it always in mind so that we do not fall into the pits of the tradition that builds questionable historical norms. A better future is only possible if we always remember the past, if we constantly talk about it, make it relevant, if we somehow keep it on the agenda—it is possible. And Bernard does so with the means of a verbal artist, with poems so simple, but expressing so much more if you look closer. We would like to end with some more lines from the poem »Proof,« because we think that Bernard's text very uniquely demonstrates the struggles that migrants such as the Windrush generation face—struggles such as being torn between the memories of their country of origin and the desire to find a sense of belonging in the country where they built their homes.

don't let me die in England I said to the pavement –
to the sea-black rain –
and never tell my grandmother why I never called –
never called to say that I thought of her daily –
that I suffered with the weight of what she had freely given –
many nights before this one I wondered what she thought of that –
what she thought of her youngest grandchild who couldn't say that
many nights before this one I tried to forget that I loved her –
turned the pain of her remembrance to the bitter lie that she could not
have loved one such as me and the proof was in the distance –

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NOTES

¹ Jay Bernard, »Proof,« in *Surge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), 17-18.

² Lea Schneider, »Der Windrush-Skandal: Wie Briten zu Illegalen Einwanderern Wurden,« *ARTE Deutsch-französischer Kultursender*, June 22, 2018, <https://info.arte.tv/de/der-windrush-skandal-die-britische-innenministerin-tritt-zurueck>. Access 15/12/2021.

³ Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, ed., *Mother Country*, (London: Headline, 2019); Mike Phillips & Trevor Phillips. *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*. (London: Harper Collins, 1998).

⁴ cf. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2020), 36.

⁵ cf. *ibid.*, 17-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 260 (Thesis XII).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 255 (Thesis IV).

¹⁰ Bernard, *Surge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), xi.

¹¹ Cambridge Dictionary, »surge.« <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/surge>. Access 21/12/2021.

¹² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257 (Thesis VIII).

¹³ Bernard, »Proof,« 17-18.

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Abbildungen

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