

After Grenfell

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Violence, Resistance
and Response

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Introduction

*Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins
and Nadine El-Enany*

The atrocity that struck the Lancaster West Estate in the early hours of 14 June 2017 was one of the most deadly preventable disasters in recent British history. From a simple refrigerator malfunction, a fire began which would turn Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey block built as social housing between 1972 and 1974, into a ‘burnt matchbox in the sky’ (Okri). At least 72 from Grenfell Tower were killed and at least 70 were injured. Over 200 people escaped as the tower blazed with suspicious speed and ferocity. It seemed that many who saw the fire, survivors, emergency services, locals and people watching the news in horror, were struck by a feeling of helplessness; a basic incapacity to *do* anything, to respond in the face of something so terrible that simply should not have happened, should not have been *allowed* to happen.

In the aftermath, survivors and first responders, community activists and neighbours, journalists and academics, politicians, international celebrities and human rights advocates sought to respond in their own ways. This sense-making was wide and various. It included simple acts of compassion, solidarity and community that gave solace and shelter. It often included anger, resentment and evidence of well-founded and deep-seated mistrust of local and national government. There were accusations of politicising what was so obviously an already political disaster. Investigations and reports were commissioned from a range of authorities. Journalists traced paper trails, contracts and sub-contracts. A public inquiry was announced that failed to take account of the needs and wishes of victims and survivors. And the community came together to contest the official response and to campaign for justice.

This book began as an attempt to bring together some of these voices, particularly those of activists, artists and academics from a variety of fields and disciplines. One thing unites all contributors:

the understanding that the Grenfell Tower fire was no unforeseeable accident. It was the result of a long history of violence. This violence is multifaceted. It has taken many shifting forms. The different responses therefore pick out and focus on particular types of violence, from the logics and legacy of colonialism, racism and xenophobia (see Chapter 3 by Nadine El-Enany, Chapter 5 by Sarah Keenan, Chapter 8 by Gracie Mae Bradley), the structural ways in which classed and racialised people are barred from legal justice (Chapter 7 by Patricia Tuitt), housing justice (Chapter 9 by Nigel de Noronha, Chapter 4 by Radical Housing Network [RHN]) and human concern (*Ghost of Grenfell* by Lowkey, Chapter 2 by Daniel Renwick, Chapter 10 by Monique Charles, *Equity* by Tony Walsh, *Grenfell Tower, June, 2017* by Ben Okri), the way they are represented and spoken for (Chapter 6 by Anna Viola Sborgi, Chapter 4 by RHN), and the national and international spatial politics and neoliberal economic forces of cities and states (Chapter 9 by de Noronha, Chapter 1 by Dan Bulley). The response and resistance called for also carry different emphases, from community action in the face of dehumanisation and structural silencing (Chapter 10 by Charles, Chapter 2 by Renwick, *Ghost of Grenfell* by Lowkey, *Photo Essay* by Parveen Ali, *Photo Essay* by Yolante Fawehinmi), a stress on national equality and governmental policy changes (Chapter 8 by Bradley, Chapter 5 by Keenan, Chapter 9 by de Noronha, *Equity* by Walsh, *Photo Essay* by Sam Boal), to changes from the global to the individual level (Chapter 3 by El-Enany, Chapter 1 by Bulley, Chapter 6 by Sborgi, *Grenfell Tower, June, 2017* by Okri).

But none of us sees the Grenfell Tower fire as a regrettable accident that demands only policy tweaks, a public inquiry and then an act of memorialisation. The atrocity was preventable, and without attention to its structural causes, violence on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire will happen again. The violence that produced this atrocity is too deep, too structural and too thoroughgoing for simple responses and solutions.

The Discomfort of Response

In seeking to introduce this volume, it is important to stress our discomfort of responding as editors. We are not from the North

Kensington area and are not members of the affected community. As Edkins' reflective essay puts it, we are 'interlopers'. This brings with it a danger of opportunism, using the label of Grenfell to further careers and push agendas. As Daniel Renwick writes in his chapter, 'Thousands now use Grenfell on their CV, there have been countless uses of its name'. And with this book we shall be amongst their number.

We have sought to combat the dangers of opportunism by not speaking for the victims, survivors or their families. We respond only in our own voices. We have aimed to include a wide range of views, some at the heart of the local struggle and some concerned to link it to broader themes. Only by doing so can we hope to balance the need to view what happened in the Lancaster West Estate as a devastating local event *and* part of wider forms of violence, broader expulsions and systematic injustices that are taking place across the world and often based on similar logics and structural power relations. This disaster is particular, specific to the North Kensington community *and* it reflects a situation echoed, to differing degrees, in all parts of the world. That situation is one in which some people are held to be more valuable, more worthy of protection, concern and attention while others are killed or allowed to die through neglect and intentional abandonment.

Nonetheless, the discomfort we feel in responding is important and reflects the way that a disaster can so easily become a commodity, turned into a product that can be bought and sold, generating profit. Related to this, even the cover art of this book – the green heart of Grenfell – is awkward and uncomfortable. On the one hand, it is a recognisable symbol that has become widely associated with inclusion and solidarity with those suffering and grieving. The Grenfell Action Group asked its supporters to wear 'green for Grenfell' on the one-year anniversary of the fire, as a symbol of 'unity, spirit and resilience' (Grenfell Action Group, 2018). However, on the other hand, it is a 'symbol that has been replicated many times, some in problematic and instrumental ways' (Renwick, Chapter 2). Associating the book with the green heart poses a danger of claiming credentials it possibly does not have. It can be interpreted as commodifying the symbol, appropriating it to sell books and profit from

the ubiquity of its presence. In this way, the green heart and this book are potentially devalued, becoming part of the profit-seeking behaviour that many contributions (e.g. Lowkey, *Ghosts of Grenfell*; RHN, Chapter 4; Charles, Chapter 10; Bulley, Chapter 1; Renwick, Chapter 2; de Noronha Chapter 9) associate with the causes of the fire itself. Although this does not negate questions of commodification and opportunism, it is important to make clear that our authors have not been paid for their contributions. All royalties due to the editors will be donated directly to a Grenfell charity, as will an agreed percentage of the publisher's profits.

Ultimately, there is no solution to discomfort in the face of avoidable suffering. We *should* be uncomfortable and account for any complicity that may exist with the violence that killed 72 people and displaced over 200. As some of these contributions recognise, one way or another a vast number of people have benefited from the colonial logics of dispossession (El-Enany, Chapter 3), the politics of austerity and its low interest rates (Bulley, Chapter 1; Walsh, *Equity*), the 'right to buy' legislation and gentrification of areas such as North Kensington (RHN, Chapter 4; de Noronha, Chapter 9). Many of us are complicit and this needs to be acknowledged and accounted for, rather than avoided and erased.

Global Expulsions; Global Resistance

One of the particularly shameful episodes that emerged from the Grenfell fire was the shambolic governmental response. Over a year after the fire, several families have yet to be rehoused in appropriate local, long-term accommodation (RHN, Chapter 4). Their accommodation remains temporary and they cannot plan for the future. This is perhaps not surprising given the actions or inaction of the local council, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), in the immediate aftermath of the fire. After a Freedom of Information request from Channel 4 News, internal emails between councillors emerged which asked 'Who is in charge?' (Aggerholm, 2018). No one knew. But this begs a question: as the causes of the fire were partly global and diffused, can we expect response and resistance to be otherwise? This is to let RBKC off too lightly, as

Andrew O'Hagan sought to do in his *London Review of Books* essay (O'Hagan, 2018), but it speaks to an important issue of whether the activism in the North Kensington community can be linked to wider forms of resistance and response to injustice and displacement.

Beginning her 2014 book, *Expulsions*, Saskia Sassen argues that,

We are confronting a formidable problem in our global political economy: the emergence of new logics of expulsion. The past two decades have seen a sharp growth in the number of people, enterprises, and places expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time.

(Sassen, 2014: 1)

Such expulsions include the removal of vast numbers of people from social welfare and health insurance; ousting people from their homes due to debt and insolvency; the requisitioning of land and supplanting of people in the Global South by states and corporations to allow for mining, fracking and industrial farming; slum clearances and toxic industrial emissions making land uninhabitable.

Whether this is anything substantially new is called into question by many of the chapters in this volume, which focus on the colonial and capitalist logics of such expulsions (El-Enany, Chapter 3; Bradley, Chapter 8; de Noronha, Chapter 9; Bulley, Chapter 1; Charles, Chapter 10; Keenan, Chapter 5). It is hard to see Sassen's 'sharp growth' against the centuries of suffering and forced movement caused by the slave trade, colonial domination, the theft and settlement of land and partition of territories. Indeed, rather than being a break from feudalism, capitalism and racism emerged from it to create a 'modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide' (Kelly, 2017). Capitalism has from the very start operated through a need to accumulate, enclosing land, impoverishing people and casting them aside (Federici, 2004: 68–75). But these broader and long-term logics of expulsion speak to the fact that the Grenfell fire can also be seen in a wider context. If there is hope for a radical politics to emerge from the activism of Latimer Road, can it find common cause with expulsions that are continuing elsewhere?

While the global political economy is determining new ways to force people from their homes – and reviving old ways, of which fire is only one – it is also perhaps generating innovative forms of resistance in certain places. For instance, a wave of largely unfounded hope was discovered in the Arab uprisings, which saw the occupation of public space to protest against multiform violence and abuses of power. This inspiration spread across the world through the Occupy movement and its intentional misuse and redirection of squares, plazas, shopping malls and other ‘commons’. More engrained and successful resistance has become institutionalised in other places. For instance, indigenous struggles in Mexico have produced ‘counter-spaces of resistance’ in Chiapas and Oaxaca, spaces of non-capitalism that attempt to put rights and people ahead of appropriation and profit (Hesketh, 2017).

A Radical Politics of Response?

Unsurprisingly, Grenfell residents were and are well aware of what the global political economy does to them. Presenter of the documentary *Failed by the State*, Ishmael Francis-Murray (Ish), who was born in Grenfell Tower and lived there until he was 25, says at the start of the film:

Grenfell burned for local *and* global reasons ... We talk politics now. And how we can take power, because we learned that we have to look after ourselves ... It's obvious global capital has no regard for people like me. It's the same story the world over, from Berlin to Rio, Madrid to New York ... What we had to live through could be a warning for you all.

(Redfish, 2017)

He continues, ‘Our local fight is against global enemies and structures. Eight guys have as much money as half the world because of the systems we are fighting’ (Redfish, 2017). It is, again, unsurprising that local residents find common cause with struggles elsewhere, and recognise that global systems need to change.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, the local community appeared on the streets. In the absence of any official support, or even a timely response by the larger charitable organisations, it fell to residents and survivors of the fire, those organisations already supporting them like the Radical Housing Network (RHN), and individuals who joined from elsewhere in solidarity, to organise help and assistance. These volunteers sorted the huge piles of donations that arrived from around the UK, organised emergency accommodation, helped those searching for missing relatives and friends or dealing with the media invasion, and comforted those traumatised by what had happened (Renwick, Chapter 2; Charles, Chapter 10; RHN, Chapter 4; Sborgi, Chapter 6). Parveen Ali's photographs in this volume, which were shown in an exhibition at St Clement's Church in Treadgold Street in June 2018, document the relief effort in which she participated as a resident (Snowdon, 2018).

For days and weeks afterwards, the North Kensington community was visible in all its unity and power (Charles, Chapter 10), contradicting stereotypes and showing itself capable of taking charge in the absence of central or local government or any other form of outside assistance. The people of the area were demonstrably politically engaged, thoroughly capable organisationally, and united across religious, political and other externally imposed divides. The contrast with the absence, incompetence and disorganisation of local and national government was stark. A largely working-class community, with a high proportion of black and minority ethnic members, living in housing estates was not supposed to be like this. They did not fit the stereotype of what Robbie Shilliam calls 'the undeserving poor'. They didn't have the characteristics that elites regularly attribute to certain groups in order to justify their social and economic exclusion (Shilliam, 2018). Nevertheless, those in authority refused to hear them, before or after the fire.

Given the history of this particular area of London, the strength of the community, its unity and its awareness should not have come as a revelation to the media, though it seemed to. The area has a long tradition of organising and resistance, from the founding of the Carnival in 1959, through the Republic of Frestonia, to the Save our Silchester campaign (Charles, Chapter 10). Community was built

and resistance strategies honed in the course of these struggles. Indeed, ‘community’ became ‘ComeUnity’, as people came together once more from June 2017 onwards. There was a different politics afoot (Renwick, Chapter 2): youths of the area (and others) self-organised for a radical alternative, commandeering space to refashion for their activism. However, it did not succeed. One reason was the lack of a pragmatic plan; another was that radical organising has been rendered mute by the neoliberal context in which it finds itself (Renwick, Chapter 2).

Has a radical politics been forming in the grounded, local activism before and after Grenfell? What do we even mean by a ‘radical politics’? For us it means a politics that challenges the system itself, that seeks to dismantle rather than reform it. What about justice? Is there justice in a narrow legal or radically transformative sense to be had? Probably not through the inquiry, with its judge-led structure, its lack of community representation and its inability to deal with long-standing and racialised oppression (Tuitt, Chapter 7). A list of demands does not exhaust the meaning of justice either. But even when no demands are voiced, as in the silent march, ‘the call for justice is being enacted: the bodies assembled “say” ... “we are still here, persisting, demanding greater justice”’ (Butler, 2015: 26). Writing of his experiences during the uprising in Greece in 2008, Hara Kouki notes how, by forming neighbourhood assemblies and solidarity groups, ‘we were transformed from invisible solitary figures rambling around in our urban misery into political subjects who managed to challenge, not the solutions that had to be applied to the situation, but the situation itself’ (Kouki, 2011). It seems the residents of North Kensington have long understood that this is how the power of local, community action works.

Colonial Legacies, Racialisation, Immigration

Despite the demise of the British Empire, Britain remains racially and colonially configured. Racialised descendants of colonised and enslaved people, regardless of when they arrived in Britain, are made disproportionately vulnerable to harm and premature death (Gilmore, 2006: 28). The majority of the Grenfell fire victims were

racialised, many of whom were Muslim (Rice-Oxley, 2018). Across the world, millions have died and are daily exposed to violence, poverty and insecurity as a result of continuing British imperialism, often masked in the language of humanitarian intervention. The vast majority of victims of recent imperial attacks have been Muslim. In Iraq, 2 million people are estimated to have been killed as a result of the US-British-led 2003 invasion (Benjamin and Davies, 2018). The ongoing material consequences of colonialism, along with imperial invasions and unequal trade and debt arrangements continue to cause people to be displaced from their homes and to make dangerous, often deadly, journeys in search of safety. Over half the adult victims of the fire had arrived in Britain since 1990 (Rice-Oxley, 2018). Sarah Keenan notes the first victim of the fire to be identified was 23-year-old Syrian refugee, Mohamed Alhajali, who fled the war in Syria, only to die in Grenfell Tower (Chapter 5). His fate was widely covered in the mainstream media, but what became a tragic ‘human interest’ story served to distract attention and anger away from wider issues of imperialism and racialised and classed exclusion (Edkins, 2019).

Britain’s colonial history and legacies of racial exclusion are central to understanding the context in which the fire took place. Any attempt to deny the relevance of race and colonial legacies to our understanding and response to the fire must be challenged (El-Enany, Chapter 3; Keenan, Chapter 5; Bradley, Chapter 8). One such casual erasure can be seen in media attempts to explain why people ‘wear green for Grenfell’. Reporting on the one-year anniversary memorial services, the *Sunday Express* claimed ‘It is thought that Grenfell is an adaptation of the words “green field” – the tower block was built on a green before the sprawl of the city took over’ (Whitfield, 2018). In fact, as Gracie Mae Bradley notes, Grenfell Tower took its name from the nearby Grenfell Walk, which itself was named after Field Marshall Lord Grenfell who fought in numerous colonial wars throughout Africa before commanding British troops in their colonial occupation of Ireland (Chapter 8). Lord Grenfell’s career, in fact, provides a useful mirror for the area around Notting Hill, much of which was initially built by Irish settlers and became deeply segregated by race and class (Bulley, Chapter 1). But by propagating a much more pleasant myth of ‘green fields’, the media are able

to whitewash this colonial past and present of North Kensington, as well as the fire itself. In contrast, the contributions of this book help to tie this back together, demonstrating the connections between the fire and colonial practices and logics (El-Enany, Chapter 3), the hostile environment that has produced a ‘border in every street’ (Keenan, Chapter 5) and the Windrush scandal, which has seen racialised groups expelled from their homes (Bradley, Chapter 8).

Housing, Regulation, Safety

The need for struggle and resistance is apparent in the very practical questions of housing provision. Much of the attention of the North Kensington community in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire was rightly focused on these questions: on the need for tenants and leaseholders to be represented on bodies managing estates or considering regeneration; on the requirement for regulations that guarantee building quality; and, most pressing of course, on provision for residents’ safety. It became clear early on in the evidence to the inquiry that Grenfell Tower had been altered from a tower block constructed in the 1970s with fire safety as a priority, to a ‘refurbished’ building with, among other things, flammable cladding, ill-fitting windows, underspecified fire doors, poor access for emergency vehicles and unusable equipment for fire fighters (Lane, 2018).

The history of housing provision in England over the last 100 years, from the programme to build ‘homes fit for heroes’ in 1919, to the present where state and local authority responsibility has been surrendered to the market and property developers’ profits, is charted by Nigel de Noronha (Chapter 9). Even when local authority house building was taking place, programmes were based on exclusion, whether of tenants unable to afford higher rents, or racialised Commonwealth citizens facing discrimination (de Noronha, Chapter 9). From Grenfell, where cladding was installed to make the building look more acceptable to rich neighbours, it is easy to see how ‘gentrification’ works: first, estates and their inhabitants are stigmatised, and then they are moved on to make way for private developers and the market (Bulley, Chapter 1; de Noronha, Chapter 9). At the same

time, deregulation and cuts in resources mean that building regulations and safety are no longer adequately enforced.

Social and economic deregulation and reducing ‘red tape’, including fire safety regulations, is part and parcel of making the privatisation and marketisation of what were previously public services more profitable for corporations (Shilliam, 2018: 177–179). The state prioritises profit for the private companies it contracts to provide ‘public’ services over the needs of the people served. The results are far-reaching and the immediate impact on those who experience the direct effects of this agenda, like the residents of Grenfell Tower, was plain: ‘in the rush to deregulate, to cut costs for business, the statutory provisions for fire safety became poorly defined and their interpretation uncertain’ (Bhandar, 2018). Deregulation has often resulted in not just fewer regulations, but a confusing landscape of provisions. This morass became clear in one of the first reports to be released to the Grenfell Inquiry, that of Dr Barbara Lane (2018). It means that companies can take advantage of loopholes and supply non-compliant materials.

Fighting these processes is not easy, especially in a context where the main UK political parties are implicated in deregulation, regeneration and marketisation. The Radical Housing Network, of which Grenfell Action Group is a member, describes how it formed in an attempt to connect and share experiences and resources across organisations from all parts of London engaged in this struggle (RHN, Chapter 4). The fight for accountability is made even harder by the intricacy and global spread of those corporations involved in regeneration and social housing projects in London, whether as developers, contractors or suppliers of building materials (Bulley, Chapter 1). Although there are volunteer organisations offering legal support in the aftermath of Grenfell, like the North Kensington Law Centre or Citizens Advice Kensington & Chelsea, the legal route may not be the most effective way to tackle long-term discrimination, oppression and injustice. The law only recognises certain forms of wrong; it does not see, nor offer remedies for, the slow violence of inadequate and unsafe housing provision (Tuitt, Chapter 7). In the end, resistance needs to find ways to address the system itself, rather than focus solely on seeking remedies within it.

The Organisation of the Volume

The book is not organised around discretely grouped themes of violence, power or resistance. Certainly, as suggested at the start of this Introduction, important topics of race, class, social housing, abandonment, community and resistance do appear throughout. But these themes are overlapping and intersecting, emerging and re-emerging as each contributor identifies their core areas of concern. This is because we, as editors, did not approach people to write on specific topics. Rather, we started out by searching for existing responses to the Grenfell Tower fire in various forms of media (television, newspapers, blogs and academic conferences). We selected and approached those that we thought shared our central claim: that this fire was not a regrettable accident but a foreseeable result of various forms of negligence, violence and structural inequalities. In many cases, we did not know what the result of our inquiries would be, or how powerful the response would become. Putting this volume together, and reading each contribution, has taught us much we did not know when we began.

In some cases, however, we did know. The poems of Ben Okri and Tony Walsh, as well as the lyrics of Lowkey's formidable *Ghosts of Grenfell* appealed on a visceral level. The poem by the Nigerian writer Ben Okri, *Grenfell Tower, June 2017*, first appeared in the unlikely setting of the *Financial Times* on 23 June 2017. He was later interviewed on Channel 4 News, and a video reading of the poem was posted (Channel 4 News, 2017a). A year later, he reflected on how he made his way to North Kensington, an area close to where he once lived, three days after the fire. What he saw brought back memories of his 'lost childhood on the edges of a civil war'; it all 'became in some mysterious way personal' (Okri, 2018). Tony Walsh's *Equity* begins with his childhood, battling rheumatic fever in a privately rented house. His life was saved and his future transformed by a move to social housing. At that time, in the 1960s, council houses were places of hope and respectability for those with access to them. Walsh is a performance poet and his poem, commissioned by Channel 4, was a video from the start (Channel 4 News, 2017b), as was Lowkey's *Ghosts of Grenfell*. The latter especially needs to be

seen in that form to be appreciated (Lowkey, 2017). The vocals of Mai Khalil and Niles 'Asheber' Hailstones, with the refrain 'Did they die or us? Did they die for us?', are haunting. The video closes with members of the community reciting the names of those who were missing, demanding 'Where are they?'

Similarly, the photo essays of Parveen Ali, Sam Boal and Yolante Fawehinmi have been chosen because they provide a very different record of events from that in much of the media. Ali and Fawehinmi are local residents; Boal is not, and his images reflect the ambiguity he feels in taking on the role of photographer in this context. Ali's photographs show the quiet dignity and resilience on the streets in the immediate aftermath, as people try to carry on with their everyday lives, and the gargantuan efforts of those organising the relief effort. Fawehinmi's images record the anger and grief expressed in posters, T-shirts and notices attached to the railings around Grenfell. The images and the poems punctuate and counterpoise the academic and activist voices in this volume.

One deadly disaster with its causes based in social and political violence and injustice – Hillsborough, where 96 Liverpool football fans were killed – was held by relatives in the public eye from 1989 until some form of justice was finally achieved in 2016 (Scraton, 2016). The academic and campaigner at the forefront of supporting this movement, Phil Scraton, has written our Preface. The fight for an official inquiry into Hillsborough and justice for the 96 lasted until inquests were rerun 27 years afterwards. A verdict of unlawful killing led finally to criminal prosecutions. A campaigner from Liverpool spoke of their strong feeling of connection with those in Grenfell at the monthly silent march (Zylbersztajn, 2018), and Liverpool fans travelling to Chelsea for an away match unfurled a banner demanding Justice for Grenfell (Pearce, 2018).

Robbie Shilliam's work on the legacies of European colonialism and the logics of separating the deserving and undeserving poor, as well as his writings specifically on Grenfell, have been an important influence on the inception and development of this book. Shilliam is another academic, like Scraton, with a long history of activism and engagement, in his case with various Rastafari and black communities in London, among others. His book, *Race and the Undeserving*

Poor, traces the way in which different groups have been painted as ‘undeserving’ in moments of struggle in British imperial history, from enslavement and poor law reform, to present-day welfare conditionality. He writes that ‘race is class ... there is no politics of class that is not already racialized’ (Shilliam, 2018: 180). He has strong links with Grenfell activists, and his Afterword concludes this volume.

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