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The Grenfell Tower fire¹

The extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works.

– Lauren Berlant²

On 14 June 2017, in the early hours of the morning, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, a twenty-four-storey apartment block in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London. It spread swiftly to engulf the whole tower in flames, trapping residents in their flats and defeating the efforts of the fire brigade to bring it under control. It burned for more than two days, leaving the blackened shell of the tower standing. The rapid escalation of the conflagration was due to the flammability of the external cladding and insulation, which had been installed in a recent refurbishment of the block.

When it happened, I could focus on nothing else. The similarity to the events in Manhattan in September 2001 was striking: the initial incredulity at how this could be happening; the horror of the rapid spread and intensity of the blaze; people at windows for a time, waving for rescue; people jumping to their deaths; the sending of firefighters into the inferno, against all protocols; the people watching in horror and helplessness from outside; and those on their phones speaking to people trapped and dying.

Other similarities emerged later: the lack of information or co-ordination; the confusing advice to stay put rather than evacuate; the solidarity of the community below; the missing posters; the memorial wall, where people added their reflections over the following days; the changing estimates of the numbers involved; the fact that some of those killed would not be known or reported missing because of their

immigration status; and the question marks over the identification of incinerated remains.

One of the most moving comments came from the daughter of a victim: ‘What is more horrendous than getting burnt alive? You know, you ask yourself, *is* there anything worse? And I’m afraid there is: having no remains.’³ The fire was allowed to burn unchecked for hours after it was clear no one else would get out alive, and this, she said, meant that remains of the dead were calcified and probably unidentifiable. These people might have been ignored and sidelined in life – by the management company who refused to listen to their concerns over fire safety, by the borough council who were more concerned with rich residents of the borough than those in the tower block – but what was taken away in death was the possibility of the return of their bodies – or some part of them at least – to their bereaved families. We were told, six months later, that all had been recovered and identified. Not everyone believed this.

There were stark differences, too. One of the most flagrant was the way in which relatives and survivors continued to be sidelined and demeaned in the aftermath of the fire. Those who perished in 9/11 were immediately co-opted by the US administration as heroes who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, and whose deaths justified – whether their relatives wanted it or not – the ensuing war on terror.⁴ A fortune was spent in the attempt to ensure that all the missing were identified. In contrast, the Grenfell dead and the survivors were seen as victims at best – warranting sympathy but only a humanitarian response – and, in some quarters, they were soon painted as the undeserving poor. In New York the questions of the safety of the building – and skyscrapers in general – was a concern raised in the aftermath. In Grenfell, residents had warned of imminent disaster in graphic terms beforehand but they had not been listened to.⁵

Six months on from the fire at Grenfell Tower, promises made in the immediate aftermath remained unfulfilled. Four out of five of the displaced families were still without permanent accommodation. The public inquiry had yet to begin taking evidence, and members of the community were still seeking adequate representation on the inquiry panel. Although the coroner had stated that all those on the

missing list had now been formally identified, giving a death toll of seventy-one, doubts about this figure persisted. On the fourteenth of every month survivors and supporters held a silent march.

The events at Grenfell raise important questions in relation to my concerns in this book. Faced with what happened, described by some as an atrocity and others as a tragedy, what is to be done? With a few exceptions, scholars concerned with so-called international questions do not seem to have engaged with Grenfell much if at all: presumably because they see it as a local or purely national event.⁶ It has been left to academics working on architecture, housing, regulation, local government, law, criminology and social policy. That was not the case with the events at the World Trade Center in New York, which were immediately taken up by international relations scholars as requiring their attention and response. Why is it that 9/11 is international, whereas Grenfell is not?

The Grenfell Tower fire challenges arguments put forward in earlier chapters concerning the relation between academics and activism, the search for an impossible certainty, and the desire to change the world. It may be necessary to give up on the fantasy of certainty, but what does that imply in terms of immediate responses to atrocity and tragedy, particularly those that reveal the ongoing marginalisation and denigration of particular groups of people, which, as I discuss below, Grenfell does? Do we stand by as academics until we have more certainty, more facts to analyse? Or do we take a stand and support those calling for change? Is it our place to do that? Is our support needed? Would it be welcomed?

Slow violence

In New York, the trauma was sudden and unexpected. In Grenfell, what happened was shocking, of course, but it was also the predicted outcome of a slow, everyday trauma that had been building through decades of neglect, discrimination and inequality, exacerbated since 2008 by the impact of austerity. Slow, everyday trauma does not so much shatter worlds, as prevent them from being built on secure foundations to begin with. It is a slow and silent violence that often goes unremarked, since 'instances of direct violence invite political

interventions more effectively than the indirect forms of structural, or slow violence'.⁷ According to Rob Nixon:

Slow violence [is] a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. [Slow violence] is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous implications playing out across a range of temporal scales.⁸

Slow violence is not easily represented in the media, and hence is not visible: it is not a newsworthy event. Michael Watts uses a similar notion of 'silent violence' in his discussions of famine and the daily struggle to maintain rural livelihoods: the famine itself just exposes the everyday workings of markets and global capitalism.⁹ Amrita Rangasami echoes this when she argues that famine has to be seen as the culmination of a series of politico-social-economic processes that move from dearth through famishment to morbidity.¹⁰ In general, outsiders recognise only the final stage, when lives are lost, as was the case with Grenfell.

Trauma is often thought of as a violent disruption of the everyday, a betrayal of what we have come to expect, and indeed I characterise it that way in [Chapter 3](#) and elsewhere.¹¹ In contrast, Lauren Berlant argues for 'moving away from the discourse of trauma', a discourse that sees trauma as something exceptional that 'has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident'.¹² Instead, she proposes a notion of 'systematic crisis or "crisis ordinariness"' that involves thinking about the ordinary as where 'people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine'.¹³ She identifies how the fantasy of the good life that previously sustained lives is threatened in the context of 'the shrinkage of the welfare state, the expansion of grey (semi-formal) economies, and the escalation of transnational migration, with its attendant rise in racism and political cynicism'. In the contemporary

global economy, ‘languages of anxiety, contingency, and precarity ... take up the space that sacrifice, upward mobility, and meritocracy used to occupy’. It is part of ‘an objective and *sensed* crisis’.¹⁴ As she points out, writing in 2011:

The current recession congeals decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era. The intensification of these processes, which reshapes conventions of racial, gendered, sexual, economic, and nation-based subordination, has also increased the probability that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people.¹⁵

Vickie Cooper and David Whyte call this process ‘the violence of austerity’. It is ‘a bureaucratised form of violence that is implemented in routine and mundane ways’.¹⁶ The impact on all but the most privileged is that they ‘are not only struggling under the financial strain but are becoming ill, physically and emotionally, and many are dying’. People ‘feel humiliated, ashamed, anxious, harassed, stigmatised and depressed ... in ways that chip away at their self-esteem and self-worth’.¹⁷

In Grenfell, it seems people were accustomed to the violence of austerity, and they were certainly aware of, and attempted to oppose, the slow violence of gentrification.¹⁸ But they had built a strong community that enabled them to maintain a firm idea of their collective worth, despite everything. As Lina Lens, a resident of the neighbouring Whitstable House, commented, ‘we may be working class, but that doesn’t mean we’re poor’.¹⁹ ‘Poor’ has associations with inferiority, lack, weakness and deficiency; ‘the poor’ are pitiable. The significance of community, both before and after the fire, was that it stood as a bulwark against a world where low income is equated with moral and social inadequacy. What was perhaps most resented, and contested, in the aftermath of the fire, was how the community was portrayed. Another Whitstable resident, Joe Walsh, notes, ‘There are teachers, bus drivers, nurses and social workers in this block. The way it was put – that it was subsidised housing, mainly unemployed – was just a way of putting us all down.’²⁰

Walsh's comment points to how people on the two estates were part of what Tiina Vaittinen calls 'the global biopolitical economy of needs'. Teachers, nurses and social workers are all providers of 'care' in the broad sense. In her study of the trajectories of Filipino nurses who move from the Philippines to the Finnish labour market, drawn by the care needs of Finland's rich but ageing population, Vaittinen reveals how the slow violence of the global economy determines whose care needs are satisfied and whose are neglected or not even recognised.²¹ Grenfell residents are well aware of what the global political economy does to them:

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.²²

After the collapse of the Twin Towers in Manhattan, Mark Wigley pointed out that some of the shock could be traced to fantasies about buildings: 'buildings are seen as a form of protection, an insulation from danger. They have to be solid because their occupants are fragile.'²³ Clothing is fashioned with care to provide protection for the human body, as I discussed in [Chapter 2](#); buildings are expected to be the same.²⁴ However, buildings, like clothes, are made these days for other reasons: commercial reasons that can lead the architect and the fashion designer to ignore or even exploit their clients. In a corporate building, for example, 'the occupants ... are irrelevant'.²⁵ The architects of corporatism design buildings it finds attractive – a smooth modernist appearance, a low cost – at the expense of a structure that is quick to evacuate or able to withstand fire. And the construction conceals its inhabitants behind a screen or façade.

When the World Trade Center towers collapsed, two things happened. First, structures that should have protected people obliterated those that relied on them for survival. Second, the collapse revealed the faces of those who had been concealed, and the way that corporate culture treats those it exploits became plain. Their faces suddenly appeared in the streets, on the missing-person posters pasted on every available surface.²⁶

Something similar happened with Grenfell. But in this case it was not just that missing-person posters appeared. The whole community became visible – and vocal – as people took to the streets to help each other and vent their anger. The community appeared in all its diversity and power, contradicting stereotypes and showing itself capable of taking charge in the absence of central or local government or any other form of outside assistance. And it was not just that the façade of the building was breached. In the case of Grenfell, it was the façade – the cladding – that had caused the fire to spread so rapidly in the first place. That cladding had been installed to make Grenfell Tower look more acceptable to the wealthy residents living in the rich parts of the borough, and, what is more scandalous, cost saving appears to have trumped fire safety.²⁷ What was revealed, therefore, as Ben Okri puts it, was that:

There's cladding everywhere. Political cladding,
Economic cladding, intellectual cladding – things that look good
But have no centre, have no heart, only moral padding.²⁸

In the trauma of the fire, the residents' worst nightmare had materialised. Their warnings and predictions had been proved accurate. But the aftermath of the fire revealed more: the truth of how they had been treated all along, and, alas, how they would continue to be treated.²⁹

When members of the North Kensington community appeared on the streets, they were revealed as 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. But this appearance could not be allowed to continue. A largely working-class community with a high proportion of black and minority ethnic members and living in a block of predominantly social housing was not supposed to be like this. Stereotypes had to be reinstated for authority structures to be maintained.

There has long been a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor – in Britain and elsewhere – a distinction that has been racialised, and one that shifts through history.³⁰ It is produced by the allocation of 'undeserving characteristics', such as laziness, welfare

dependency and criminal tendencies, to certain groups. As Robbie Shilliam elucidates:

The enslavement of Africans was a fundamental reference point for the initial racialization of deserving and undeserving characteristics, with the 'slave' – and thereby the condition of blackness, exemplifying the latter. ... Other subjects of empire were 'blackened' in the process of also being made to carry undeserving characteristics.³¹

It is not only black and ethnic minority communities that can be 'blackened'. As Shilliam shows, nineteenth-century British Poor Laws 'racialized those who were falling into pauperism or had become paupers. ... Having become undeserving, whether wilfully or unjustly, they were not considered to be indigenously white. Whether they deserved it or not, they were blackened.'³² It is only recently that the white working class has sometimes been painted as deserving. The events after Hillsborough, when Liverpool football supporters were vilified and 'public denigration extended beyond the fans to include the city and its people', were an example of the blackening of certain sectors of the white population by others.³³

After Grenfell, white residents were blackened along with everyone else. Even black and minority ethnic people found themselves the subjects of what could be called a re-blackening. They had vigorously contested the racism they been subjected to over generations, and begun to establish, with varying degrees of success, their place within the variety of ways of being 'British'. Then, after the fire, they were portrayed as victims: in need of sympathy, but not to be given a proper political voice. By implication, and often directly, they were once again reduced to the undeserving poor. Their hard-built sense of belonging was threatened at precisely the time when it was simultaneously strengthened by the community action that emerged in the aftermath.

Even well-meaning commentators contributed to the blackening of the Grenfell community as a whole. According to Colin Prescod and Daniel Renwick, writing in the Institute of Race Relations comment blog, Grenfell exposed to full public view 'the underbelly of the metropolis, showing the savage menace under which the complaining

poor have lived for decades'.³⁴ However commendable the intention, words such as 'underbelly', 'savage' and 'complaining poor' evoke 'undeserving' characteristics that reinforce racialised divisions. Michael J. Rigby, in an article in *The Lancet* stressing the importance of contesting racism, goes on to say:

But racism alone did not cause the plight of the residents of Grenfell Tower. Many forms of disadvantage often interact, such as poor employment opportunities, fractured households, inadequate housing, poor health, low levels of education, and poor language skills, and individuals who are non-nationals are disproportionately victim to these.³⁵

Again, terms such as 'plight', 'poor', 'inadequate' and 'fractured' can, whether intentionally or not, reinforce the racialised ascription of 'undeserving characteristics' to the Grenfell Tower community. Local resident and filmmaker Ishmail Blagrove summed it up:

We have a government and borough that has neglected this community, that does not see this community, that has disregarded and locked down on working-class white people as well as non-white people in this community – treated us with contempt. ... This isn't a race thing, it isn't black or white, this is a class thing. ... We are not going to be dismissed by hollow platitudes.³⁶

Swift justice?

There is much that is not yet clear about what happened during and in the aftermath of the fire, and we are unlikely to know more any time soon. Important constituencies have been rendered unable to speak: firefighters, police, forensic experts and others intimately involved with the recovery effort and the criminal investigation. Justice may be a long time coming, if indeed it arrives at all. The inquiry may produce more information, or we may have to wait decades, as we did after Hillsborough, before significant elements are made public.³⁷ In the meantime, it appears that the community has deliberately shut itself off from the mainstream media – completely understandable, given the media frenzy it was subjected to in the immediate aftermath.

There is a fair amount of information in the public domain already about one small series of events in the direct aftermath, which can perhaps give some insight into what was happening more broadly. It involves the actions of several people in the three days immediately following the fire: a resident who died in the fire and his relatives, a witness who lived close by, and an outsider who arrived on the scene later. I want to focus now on the detail of what happened, drawing on the accounts of those involved.

Mohammed al-Haj Ali, an engineering student living on the fourteenth floor of Grenfell Tower, was the first person to be named as among the dead.³⁸ One of his brothers, Omar, shared the flat with him, and Hashem, his other brother, lived nearby. Omar had escaped, thinking Mohammed was just behind him on the stairs. When he reached the ground and couldn't find his brother he called him. Hashem also spoke to Mohammed by phone until around 4.30 a.m. on Wednesday 14 June. Speaking to a BBC reporter, Hashem later described what happened:

Omar and Mohammed were leaving the house together, they were leaving the flat together, but there was so much smoke they couldn't even see each other. When Omar got down the stairs, he called Mohammed and Mohammed was saying, 'Why did you leave me, Omar?' Mohammed was on his own in the flat. Omar said, 'Why didn't you come with me?' Mohammed said, 'I couldn't, there was so much smoke.' Then Omar had some breathing problems, he couldn't speak any more, so I took the phone and spoke to Mohammed for nearly an hour. Yeah. And just before that Omar told Mohammed to go down the stairs, do as much as he could to go down the stairs. But Mohammed said, 'The door is blocked. We cannot open the door any more, we don't know what's happened to the door.' Mohammed couldn't go out and he went back to the flat. I was talking to him for an hour. He was with two ladies and one child in the flat. There was so much smoke. I was telling him to do his best. I said, 'Mohammed, put a wet towel on your nose, try to breathe in, move down on the floor, don't stand still, because you will breathe in so much smoke.' He was doing his best, but then he

was saying, ‘Hashem, I can’t, I can’t afford it any more.’ And, yeah. He was speaking slower and slower as time went, until he said the fire broke, broke into the flat and that was the last time I talked to him. And then I don’t know what happened to his phone, if his phone was dropped, I could hear cracking, so, I don’t know what was it. And then I couldn’t speak to him any more. That was the last time I talked to him, that was around four thirty in the morning.³⁹

The reporter didn’t seem to be listening to Hashem’s account. He looked distracted by other stories coming at him through his earpiece, and when Hashem finished, he expressed the customary condolences and moved on to another report without any follow-up questions. However, the story of the three brothers, who had arrived in the UK a few years before as refugees from the Syrian War, made all the news outlets.⁴⁰ Many saw it as tragic that the three had escaped war only for one of them to die in London, but others took it as confirmation that the tower was full of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants.

Omega Mwaikambo, a chef living in Testerton Walk, just next to Grenfell Tower, returned from work shortly after midnight on 14 June. At about 1 a.m., he was disturbed by strange sounds from outside, and he joined the other residents watching what was happening and trying to help where they could. Eventually, at about 5 a.m., he returned to his flat. He came across an abandoned body, loosely wrapped in plastic and lying in a puddle on the floor of the entranceway. There was no one with the body and, according to Mwaikambo, it lay there unaccompanied for around two hours. Like everyone else, Mwaikambo had been taking photographs that night, and he took photographs again, first of the body bag, and then, lifting the flap covering the face, several images of the face of the corpse itself. He posted the images on his Facebook account, writing, ‘Does anyone know this body lying outside my flat for more than two hours?’

At 8 a.m. that morning, Wednesday 14 June, freelance photographer Jason Kay had just arrived on the scene. He came across Mwaikambo and obtained access to his photographs from earlier in the morning.⁴¹ Kay contacted the police. He told a BBC Newsnight reporter, ‘I felt I had to report that to the authorities given the circumstances. I did turn

him into the cops. I'd do it again. Absolutely. One hundred percent.⁴² Later the same day, Mwaikambo received a call from Kay, proposing they meet. As Kay explains, 'The police said, "Do you know where he is now?" I said, "I've got his mobile number – I can give him a call."⁴³ Mwaikambo arrived at 6 p.m. to find six police officers waiting for him, and a photographer filming the scene.⁴⁴ Mwaikambo was arrested 'on suspicion of sending malicious communications and obstructing a coroner' and taken to a west London police station.⁴⁵ He was later charged under section 127 of the Communications Act.⁴⁶ His arrest was widely reported.⁴⁷

The following morning, Thursday 15 June, the day after the fire, Mohammed al-Haj Ali was confirmed as the first victim of the fire. The announcement came from his family and the charity he worked with. Shortly after 11 a.m. on Thursday morning, Mohammed's brother Hashem spoke to a BBC News reporter, who asked what they'd been doing to find their brother. Hashem replied:

We've looked yesterday, we looked around the building. There were some places where people could go and sit there. They brought the casualties over there as well. So, we went to three centres. We put Mohammed's name there, but until now nobody told us anything about him. We also told the police. They gave us a reference number for Mohammed. We told them about all his features, his body features, but still no information about Mohammed. Until today's morning, we saw a picture of his dead body, on social media, which was frustrating and, yeah. So we saw, we saw the picture on social media and the police didn't know anything about this. So this picture shouldn't have been released on social media. The police say they believe, or, they can't tell us anything about Mohammed yet, until they get enough information, and so. They asked us about his [inaudible], his [inaudible] tests, lots of information, because they wanted to match his DNA, I don't know, they have their own criteria, but we believe we saw Mohammed's dead body on social media. But until now he's lost and we don't know where he is.⁴⁸

Justice moved swiftly for Mwaikambo. Following his arrest on Wednesday 14 June, he had been refused bail for his own safety. On

Friday 16 June, the day when anger among the community spilled over into confrontation in Kensington Town Hall, he was brought to trial at Westminster Magistrates' Court and entered a guilty plea to two charges of breaching the Communications Act, one for posting images of the exterior of the body bag, one for posting images of the face. Deputy Senior District Judge Tanweer Ikram sentenced him to six weeks for each charge to run consecutively, a total of three months' imprisonment – a hefty sentence for the offence, especially given his guilty plea. The judge stated: 'What you have done by uploading those photos shows absolutely no respect to this poor victim. To show his face as he lies there is beyond words.'⁴⁹ The section of the Communications Act under which Mwaikambo was charged prohibits the sending 'by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character'.⁵⁰ It is for the magistrate to decide whether the matter is 'grossly offensive', but there is also some sense that the defendant's *intention* matters.⁵¹ According to the defence lawyer, Mwaikambo was posting the images to 'show how the victim was being treated'. The severity of the sentence means the court must have considered the offence 'so serious that neither a fine alone nor a community sentence can be justified'.⁵² For the offence to fall within category one of the relevant sentencing guidelines, both higher culpability and greater harm have to be demonstrated.⁵³

During the trial, police said that the body had not yet been formally identified. According to the prosecutor, 'It appears as if that individual might have been someone that jumped from the tower and had not survived and was waiting to be moved to the coroner's mortuary.'⁵⁴ The report in the *Independent* noted that one man had told the BBC that the picture was of his brother, and that the trial 'comes as the community continue to demand answers from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea as dozens of people remain missing'.⁵⁵

On Saturday 17 June the Metropolitan Police announced the formal identification of al-Haj Ali 'following a post mortem examination carried out on Friday, 16 June at Westminster Mortuary'.⁵⁶ Friends and family raised funds for his funeral, which took place on 21 June, and the Home Office facilitated his parents' journey from Syria to attend.⁵⁷ According to a Home Office spokesman, speaking

on Saturday 17 June, they had made contact with Mr al-Haj Ali's family the day before and 'assisted them in making arrangements for their travel to the UK in these terribly sad circumstances'.⁵⁸ At the inquest, opened and adjourned by Westminster coroner Dr Fiona Wilcox on Wednesday 28 June and attended by the two surviving brothers, the preliminary cause of death was given as 'multiple injuries consistent with a fall from a height'.⁵⁹

On his release, having served his sentence, Mwaikambo was interviewed on BBC Newsnight by Dan Newling. This is what he said:

It was sort of like watching the September 11 World Trade Center, but this was real, in front of my eyes. Everybody had their own gadgets, like phones, iPads, so everybody was filming, taking pictures, talking on the phone. Everybody was doing whatever it was, due to the shock and horror. The whole ordeal. I was in and out of my senses, but I was really struggling to compose myself. That body was not meant to be there in the first place. Regardless. I can understand that there was something massive happening outside, but it should not be kept in that place, in a puddle of dirty water. That really, really, really messed my head up. ... God knows what I was thinking in my head. But I was holding my iPad. The body was not wrapped tightly; it was loosely wrapped. Inside I was just saying to myself, 'Does anybody know this person?' Not even knowing what I was doing. It just happened. No explanation. But with anger. Traumatized. Mesmerized as well. ... Morally I know it's wrong. But it was not morally right for a body – for its respect – to be left unattended out there. ... It's just a picture. I didn't steal. I didn't kill. I didn't commit any crime that I know is really a high risk. I can understand why people are angry. Why would anybody take a photo of a dead person, if they were in a normal state of mind? Why would anybody do such a thing?⁶⁰

Of course, professionals take photographs of the dead all the time in the aftermath of disaster as a record and to enable family members to view the images as a preliminary to visiting the mortuary. But woe betide an individual who takes it upon himself to do such a thing outside the protocols of disaster management. There is a risk that

the family might find out their relative's fate before the authorities are ready to inform them, and that the public might discover the unmentionable fact that people did indeed jump from the burning tower when it became the only tolerable option. We don't know how the al-Haj Ali family came across the photograph of Mohammed, but it is unlikely that it was through random browsing of the internet, since the images didn't 'go viral'. It seems to me more likely that they were alerted by reports of Mwaikambo's arrest on the Wednesday evening. In any case their 'frustration' seems more connected with the unwillingness or inability of the police to acknowledge what the family had found, rather than with their discovery of the photograph.

Mwaikambo was right that the body should not have been left unattended in a space open to the public. It is not only 'morally wrong'; it is against established police procedures. Disaster protocols require the establishment of what is called a holding audit area: 'a temporary structure where deceased persons and human remains retrieved from the scene of a major incident can be taken initially, pending transfer to a designated mortuary'. Access is restricted, and 'a log must be kept of the name and role of every individual who enters and exits, along with the reasons for access and the time'.⁶¹ It appears that the all-important audit trail, vital for the process of Disaster Victim Identification, was no longer intact by the time Mwaikambo came across the body, which could be why the potential charge of 'obstructing a coroner' was not pursued.⁶²

Whether it was courage or desperation on his part, or something else, Mohammed al-Haj Ali's actions meant that his body was retrieved at an early stage and was intact apart from the injuries caused by his fall. We don't know how al-Haj Ali's brothers came across Mwaikambo's photograph, but that led to his early identification by the family. Other factors may have been at play, but it may have speeded the process of formal identification and set in motion the Home Office's involvement. The funeral took place just a week after the fire, and a week before the Coroner's inquest into al-Haj Ali's death.

Slow justice

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, what was most striking was the absence of any official response from the local council, central

government or established relief agencies, and there was no evidence that an effective civil contingencies plan was being put into effect.⁶³ It seemed that only the fire brigade and the police were there, tackling the blaze, setting up cordons and preventing distraught relatives from entering the building. The general public, apparently profoundly shocked, sent huge volumes of donations, but it was left to volunteers from the local community to organise collection and distribution. Even emergency accommodation for those who had escaped the blaze was not forthcoming at first. All that happened was that the press corps arrived in force, interviewing people they came across on the surrounding streets, looking for the most deeply distressed. Chahine Bouchab, a volunteer from a neighbouring block, summarised the feeling succinctly:

If I had known the council was not going to show up, on 7pm on day one I would have called the UN to get assistance because people are sleeping on blankets on the floor. If the government didn't want to do anything they could have at least called someone who can. This is our 9/11 and we've come together and we need to stick together – just because this isn't a terrorist attack and just because we're not all wealthy doesn't mean we shouldn't be heard.⁶⁴

One of the most pressing concerns of family and friends of those in the tower was for news of those they could not locate. In such situations, the need to find friends and relatives takes priority over everything else, and certainly over the need for food and accommodation. Even those who had been on the phone to their relatives still needed confirmation of what had happened; there was always hope, against all probability, that someone might have survived. Most had to wait very much longer than Mohammed al-Haj Ali's family for any information at all.

From the beginning, there seemed to be a lack of co-ordination in the recovery process – the failure of the chain of evidence in the case of Mohammed al-Haj Ali is an example – and there was a lack of transparency about how lists of missing people were being produced. The piecemeal way figures of fatalities were released did nothing to inspire confidence, and several people began compiling their own lists

of missing people.⁶⁵ As in the aftermath of the London tube and bus bombings in 2007, people reporting someone missing were required, as the al-Haj Ali family was, to give comprehensive details of their relative, but they were given no information in return.⁶⁶

On 28 June police revealed that the list provided by the tenant management organisation earlier had been immediately found to be inaccurate. They had spoken to at least one occupant from 106 of the 129 flats in the tower, but for twenty-three flats they had not been able to trace anyone alive who lived there, and they were reviewing other sources of information embracing, as Detective Chief Superintendent Fiona McCormack put it, ‘all imaginable sources from government agencies to fast food delivery companies’, including the 999 calls on the night from people in those flats who had since been killed. At that briefing and others, police warned that ‘the tragic reality is that due to the intense heat of the fire there are some people who we may never identify’. On 5 July 2017 Metropolitan Police Commander Stuart Cundy reported that the last of the ‘visible human remains’ had been recovered from the tower and transferred to Westminster Mortuary. Police officers were continuing to go through the 15.5 tonnes of debris on each floor of the tower to find the human remains still there.⁶⁷

On 22 September, Cundy said there were cases of fraud coming to light, including people reported missing turning out to be fictitious, meaning the final death toll could be slightly lower than the figure that had been given. But, he added, there could still be people among the dead with no social or family connection outside the tower, and not on any official lists.⁶⁸ When the final inquests were opened and adjourned on 22 November, Westminster Coroner Fiona Wilcox announced that ‘the temporary mortuary and investigation suites erected in the court’s back yard will be dismantled’ and that ‘all those on the missing list have been found and identified’.⁶⁹ Her statement is not the same as saying that all who died have been found. It is puzzling too, first, that no unidentified remains are reported, after all the earlier indications that the list of missing persons might be incomplete, and, second, that all those on the missing list have been identified, given statements that some remains might be unidentifiable.

There are concerns about the way the forensic investigation was handled, with police officers rather than forensic anthropologists

conducting the recovery of remains, and a mortuary set up 'in the court's back yard'. Since the closure of the Forensic Science Service in 2012, forensic work is contracted out to private companies, who benefit from the escalating search for DNA evidence supplanting other forms of identification.⁷⁰ There is a forensic science regulator, but without powers to enforce quality standards, and there are concerns that, with budget cuts, the police are increasingly using their own laboratories which do not necessarily have full accreditation. The Metropolitan Police outsource their DNA profiling, which consumes 60 per cent of their forensics budget.⁷¹

Six months after the fire, as the inquests gave way to the inquiry, residents and families of those killed and injured continued to work together with other members of the North Kensington community to assert their need for recognition and justice, and to work to change the policy and attitudes that led up to the fire. On 14 December 2017, a memorial service was held in St. Paul's Cathedral and the community held its own monthly march: a silent march that demonstrated the dignity of the community and expressed their demand 'to be recognised, to be valued'.⁷² The procedural hearings for the inquiry set up by Prime Minister Theresa May began earlier that week, with lawyers representing residents and families calling for a decision-making panel more representative of those affected to sit alongside the judge.

Phil Scraton, a member of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, argued that the Hillsborough panel would be a good model to work with, though it seems to be a one off. An inquiry 'will not have the confidence of the community unless it demonstrates a profound understanding of the context, circumstances and aftermath ... engaging deeply and meaningfully with families and survivors'.⁷³ It has to 'carry the weight of those that have born the loss'. In his view, looking at the North Kensington community's response to Grenfell, 'you can see how people, ordinary people who've lost everything, will no longer actually sit back and be passive observers of their own injustice, of their own suffering'.⁷⁴ For lawyer Abbas Nawrozzadeh, 'justice is only justice if it is timely'. If it takes as long as the twenty-seven-year Hillsborough campaign, 'that's not justice, because people have died in that time. ... We have to have a timely inquiry that's streamlined

and led on a collaborative approach and understands and listens to the residents.⁷⁵

In Mwaikambo's case justice was swift, and the complexities of his actions readily overlooked. He was perhaps an easy target and a distraction amidst the otherwise appalling apparent dereliction of duty by contractors involved in the refurbishment of the tower and the lack of official response. His case is reminiscent of the prosecution of Abacus Bank in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis: a small Chinatown neighbourhood bank in New York City that was the only commercial bank brought to trial for mortgage fraud after the financial crisis.⁷⁶ In that case, the bank was acquitted, and the prosecution criticised for having picked on someone who was, in the title of a documentary about the case, 'small enough to jail'.⁷⁷

In the case of the Grenfell inquiry, the justice that relatives, survivors and residents seek relates as much to the slow violence they have endured, and to how they were demeaned and not listened to prior to and after the fire, as it does to the culpability of the web of authorities, contractors and subcontractors involved in the building and refurbishment of the block. That slow violence does not form part of the terms of reference of the inquiry, which are 'to examine the circumstances surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017'. The list of issues to be investigated includes only the construction of the building and its subsequent modification, and the response to the fire.⁷⁸ What is more 'neo-liberal practices of outsourcing, deregulation and privatisation have made quick justice impossible'.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The slow violence continues for the Grenfell survivors. Dispersed to hotel rooms or temporary accommodation, they are still alive, but taking up the threads of their lives is difficult. An impenetrable bureaucracy makes obtaining appropriate help into a demanding exercise involving navigating the thirty-six different phone numbers on the Government's website.⁸⁰ Demands for justice are met with formal legalistic procedures. It is difficult to see what those of us academics who don't have any direct links with North Kensington can do, or

even what would authorise us to speak. Our writings and our abstract theoretical arguments seem of little use. Those we teach – some of whom will have more direct connections with Grenfell than we do – may benefit from our validation. Although their views do not need our authorising, we can support what they decide to do, and we can give them examples of how those in similar situations who have been denigrated, ignored or belittled have responded. In some cases our expertise may mean we have some small practical help to offer. In the case of Hillsborough, the research and persistence of Scraton across decades were hugely significant. He was in a position – as one of the Liverpool fans – to recognise the blackening that took place and had the research nous to contest it.

What does justice mean? Certainly it involves inquests, inquiries and prosecutions: facts must be brought out, people held accountable. But there is more to it than that, especially given the daily discrimination and slow injustice that those involved have been and are being subjected to. A list of demands does not exhaust the meaning of justice. Even when no demands are voiced, as in the Grenfell silent march, ‘the call for justice is being enacted: the bodies assembled “say” “we are not disposable” whether or not they are using words at the moment; what they say, as it were, is “we are still here, persisting, demanding greater justice”’.⁸¹

Notes

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