# CHANGE AND THE POLITICS OF CERTAINTY

## JENNY EDKINS

*'This is a book for our times'*
**Cynthia Enloe**

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# Change and the politics of certainty

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Er cof
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# Introduction

*The endless longing of the underprivileged that history (and life)
be different from what it has been and still is.*

– John Berger[1]

In the current historical conjuncture, with continuing oppression and
exploitation, increasing inequality, persistent racism, and the resur-
gence of forms of exclusion and state violence, the imperative for
change seems undeniable. But difficulties and tensions arise once we
attempt to bring it about. This book stems from my own struggle as an
academic to articulate or unearth alternatives and forms of resistance,
and my recognition that the tools we have at hand to attempt this
move can be precisely those that have produced and hence continually
reproduce what we are trying to escape. In particular, the fantasy of
escape – to an outside, to a better world – is what entrenches us more
firmly in the nightmare. And yet, giving up altogether on dreams of a
different world is difficult, especially if, or maybe only if, we are in a
position of racial, gender or class privilege.

   One notable exponent of the dangers of thinking in terms of an
outside to which we can escape is R.B.J. Walker. He begins his book
*Inside/Outside* with a quotation from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics
of Space*: 'Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious
geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in met-
aphorical domains.'[2] Geometry is an imaginary realm that operates
with such impossible abstractions as straight lines. A straight line
cannot exist in practice: there can be no such thing as a line without
width, nor can the absolute precision implied by the word 'straight'
ever be achieved. Engineering expertise is needed to translate the

abstractions of geometry – useful as they are – into the approximations that produce a workable edifice. And yet such abstractions form 'the categories and assumptions' that constrain 'attempts to think otherwise about political possibilities'.[3] Importantly, we are not encouraged to examine them, but to take them for granted. Rather than seeing our assumptions as 'historically specific understandings of space and time', we treat them as common sense.[4] The 'we' here stands outside history. It is the universalised, unprovincialised subject.[5]

Maja Zehfuss points out how the idea of changing the world relies on the notion of an outside and a concomitant separation between 'us' over here and 'the world' over there. Unless we see ourselves as standing outside the world rather than being a part of it, the idea that 'we' can decide to do something to change 'it' is misplaced. If we are not 'outside' – if there is no outside – then everything we do or do not do affects the world of which we are part. The desire to change the world, she reminds us, 'reveals a very particular attitude to the world, [where] we are at its centre and very much in charge. The world is there for us to do with as we please.'[6] We – and here the 'we' has to be 'we white Westerners' – we see ourselves as in control, whereas in reality social and political life is more complex and we are already implicated. What is more, we never know enough to decide what best to do, and we can never do everything we ought to do: tackling one problem involves neglecting others.

Another issue at stake is that seeing ourselves in a privileged position – outside the world looking in, somehow superior and equipped to bring about change – means there is a temptation to disregard those who disagree with our ideas of what should be done. They are in the world; we are above it. We see ourselves as doing our duty – and perhaps repaying or securing our privilege – by working to improve the world and the lives of other people. We are the 'givers' – we know what needs to be done – they are the 'receivers'. But, as Naeem Inayatullah points out, our 'gift' may prompt resentment among the 'receivers': we are claiming to know what other people need, and telling them what they should do. Inayatullah gently encourages us to see our desire to help – to change the world – as a need also. We may suspect that our knowledge is incomplete, but attempt to conceal our doubt. Indeed, Inayatullah suggests that 'we emphasise what is good

for others in order to avoid the pain of facing our own lack'. When we act to change the world, we are concealing our inability to do so. He proposes that we acknowledge our doubt and seek what he calls 'knowledge encounters'.[7]

What this approach entails might be both an acceptance of the tragedy of a world that is beyond our control, however privileged we are, and a retention of hope – as Stuart Hall says, a politics 'without guarantees'.[8] David Scott, in his perceptive discussion of Hall's work, suggests that Hall's 'fundamentally *ethical* stance as an engaged intellectual … is illuminated in his solicitous affirmation of a mode of giving that is simultaneously a mode of receiving'.[9] It is an approach that eschews 'the lost dream or illusion of theoretical certainty'. The problem, Hall reminds us, is that 'certainty stimulates orthodoxy, the frozen rituals and intonation of an already witnessed truth, and all the other attributes of a theory that is incapable of fresh insights'. We should pay attention instead to a theoretically informed analysis of 'the existing balance of social forces, the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture'.[10] We should 'honor the contingency of the present' and give up on the idea of 'history-as-teleology: a progressively unfolding succession … carrying humanity forward from a determinate past in the direction of a specifiable future'.[11] We need to become streetwise, as those less secure than we like to think ourselves have always had to be.

What happens if we examine the assumptions that we are used to taking for granted? If we cannot stand outside the world and change it, what are we to do in the face of injustice? If as scholars we have no privileged standing in relation to the world, are we as helpless as anyone else? Should we be listening as much as, or more than, speaking or writing? Are our theories and our analyses useless, or even, more likely, counterproductive, re-inscribing the inequalities we seek to remove? Should we acknowledge that if there is no certainty about the past, we surely cannot predict the future? Would acknowledging this inadequacy enable a different form of politics? Or is this just another form of the same desire for escape?

In this book I wrestle with these questions through a series of reflections in three different registers that can be loosely characterised as autobiographical, aesthetic and quasi-theoretical. Several of the

chapters draw on early prototype essays written as spin-offs from what seemed at one time to be the main trajectory of my work: an examination of sovereignty and subjectivity – or, to put it otherwise, personhood and politics – in the various contexts of famines, war and enforced disappearance. The embryonic essays arose as reflections on 'events', or from encounters with plays, films or exhibitions, or as responses to invitations to contribute chapters or talks. It turns out that these marginal writings are in fact not peripheral at all, but writings that tackle what is perhaps the most central question behind my work: what are we to do? This book draws together and re-examines these rather scattered thoughts – thoughts that on the whole I have previously avoided addressing – and examines where they lead.

Like the scattering of particles produced in a high-energy collision in a cloud chamber, tracing the tracks of thoughts generated when the attempt to write collides with the impossibility of doing so can tell us something, perhaps, about the nature of thinking itself. Of course, in practice, the impossibility of writing has to be overcome, we are told: research targets have to be met, metrics satisfied. Books have to be finished and published – despite the way thoughts inevitably escape the page.

My first book was ostensibly about concepts of famine and practices of aid: how attempts to theorise famine are limited and how aid practices function on the ground to maintain a particular system based on scarcity and division.[12] It turns out to be, in retrospect, more about the search for answers. The book asked *whose* hunger was in question: the hunger of those without food, or the hunger of academics – and western intellectuals in particular – for non-existent answers and the security and certainty of a better world. It focused not on those who encountered famine – apart from a brief section noting how differently they viewed it – but on aid practitioners and theorists. It looked at what those trying to help were doing.

In contrast, my second book examined both those who experienced trauma and those treating them.[13] It arose out of a project that aimed to examine 'security', but ended up doing something rather different. According to psychoanalytic approaches to self and society, in contemporary westernised political communities both are formed around a lack or excess. Both are inescapably insecure, contingent.

They can never be complete – the gap can never be fully closed, or the surplus contained. The lack can be concealed, however, and it usually is – producing a social fantasy that makes us feel secure. The book examined what happens when something shatters the illusion, and reveals the inevitable insecurity and uncertainty of the world. We can see that we have been betrayed – duped – by those who sent us to fight for our country, for example, and this is traumatic. We have a choice: to forget the trauma ever happened and return to the fantasy of security; or, more challenging perhaps, to live with insecurity. If we were able to live with insecurity, my argument went, then we would not need a sovereign politics of capital, nation and state to make us feel secure – a different world would be possible.

My third book, about missing people and the contrasting responses of relatives and the authorities to disappearance, was in the end about 'missingness' as such.[14] It was about the need, faced by those with missing relatives but avoided by the more privileged of the rest of us much of the time, to live with two forms of ambiguity. First, the ambiguity of loss: not knowing whether the missing person was dead, or whether they would walk through the door at any moment. Second, the ambiguity of personhood itself, and the way in which we not only do not 'know' anyone else for certain – who they are or what they might do next – we do not even 'know' ourselves. Living with that unknowing, not trying to pin people down, define and characterise them, turns out to be an essential part of what it means to let a person be a 'person', not an object. In other words, incompleteness, insecurity and vulnerability are essential to personhood.

Summarising these three books reveals an underlying thread: an argument that what we need is to traverse the fantasy: to give up on the search for certainty and security. It is that thread that this book attempts to address.

However, I refuse to give up on another, different 'dream', one many might say is an impossibility: that living without a fantasy that provides security and the comfort of imaginary wholeness is possible. Indeed, many people already live such a life: open to whatever possibilities may appear, not constrained by categories or divisions or supported by imaginaries of completeness. I discuss examples in the second half of the book. Colleagues – and readers of earlier drafts

– have pointed to contradictions they see in my work between an analytical pessimism and a tendency to cling on to a sliver of impossible hope: an optimism of the will, perhaps. This stance is, they tell me, against all reason: it is not where my analysis leads. They question my refusal to see sense, and ask where that refusal comes from and why it is so fierce. I admit it appears irrational, untenable, illogical. But nevertheless, it makes sense on different terms, ones that may be hard to argue rationally. The dream of a world without the fantasy of certainty and security is not necessarily an impossible dream. It is certainty and security that are impossible, and the fantasy ultimately cannot and does not hold, despite all our efforts to shore it up.

As I realised on my return from my visit to Ground Zero in May 2014, described in Chapter 6, I carry the trauma – and the insistence on possibility it represents – folded in my pocket. I suspect that that is what we all do, more or less. And in some profound way, that well-thumbed scrap of paper that we hold on to despite everything is what grounds us. It connects us: to each other and to the universe. However we make sense of our place in the world, and however we mistreat each other, we are connected, complicit even. Why do we think we should behave as if it were otherwise?

The imperative to *do something* itself arises, of course, from a dissatisfaction with the world as it seems to be. I can be more specific. My dissatisfaction – indeed, despair – is with the unfairness and injustice of the world: a world where some have so much more than they need and others have less, and where those who have less are treated as a race apart, somehow responsible for their own fate. What could a white, Oxford-educated, British woman, a professor in a well-known department, have to say about inequality? Obviously, I faced certain expectations – and indeed expected certain things of myself – that derived solely from the position I occupied as a woman. But more than that, I carry within me the weight of the hopes and aspirations of the women who have gone before me: a mother who left school at fourteen, for example, and a grandmother who worked in the Lancashire cotton mills. Both accepted their fate as part of the natural order of things. In the end perhaps the point is that we all feel the impact of the current way of doing things – even the hugely privileged – though in vastly differing ways.

In order to address the questions I have set out, a different way of writing is called for. Attention to other forms of expression (theatre, films, images, exhibitions, writings from outside academia) and an autobiographical or auto-ethnographic sensibility can be of assistance. The book is framed by two auto-ethnographic accounts, written ten years apart, one in 2007 and the other in 2017. The first attempts to give an account of how I ended up as a scholar in an international politics department – an unexpected arrival point for someone who graduated as a physicist specialising in nuclear and solid state physics at Oxford in the 1970s. The second reflects on the ten years that separate the two accounts, and delves further into how an unsettling class background led to, on the one hand, a strong desire for ways of bridging that gulf and, on the other, an anger at the injustice of such divides.

Chapter 1 is inspired by Frantz Fanon's autobiographical account in *Black Skin, White Masks* of how the racist gaze makes him 'an object in the midst of other objects'.[15] It charts my intellectual move from an attempt to fathom the world and how it works to an advocacy of what Fanon sees as an everyday openness to each other. In recounting how the family photograph as object survives the living body, and telling of the search for a missing family member in the archives, it traces the interweaving of life and thought over time. It is underpinned by an anger at objectification, and reveals how the unknown has an impact on what and who we think we know. I discovered my grandfather was missing; I did not realise my father was missing too.

In the second chapter I explore practices of problematisation and expertise in another way. I argue that looking for solutions to problems can reproduce the regime of truth that leads to the so-called problems in the first place. Problematising famine is an example, and what are put forward as ways of ending hunger can turn out to be functioning to reproduce it. Turning to expertise, the chapter examines the case of Dr David Kelly, a scientist who attempted to challenge the manipulation of intelligence to justify the Iraq War. When 'experts' such as Kelly enter the political fray, their voices are sometimes either not heard, or even suppressed. Is there an alternative? I suggest that thinking in terms of a slow listening and an excavation of forgotten subaltern knowledges – and a quiet rebuilding of the world, brick by brick – may help.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to questions of security and the idea of the human in humanitarian intervention. In Chapter 3, I juxtapose quantum cosmology and Lacanian psychoanalysis in a reading of Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen*, and discuss its staging and the controversies it provoked. The play explores Werner Heisenberg's visit to Neils Bohr in Copenhagen during the Second World War and their discussions about the feasibility of developing nuclear weapons. Did either of them attempt, as experts, to stall the development of nuclear weapons? It enacts three divergent scenarios of the meeting and shows how it is not possible to determine which is the more accurate. Memory is unreliable, and, more importantly, we cannot even know our own thoughts and motivations, let alone those of others. The chapter points to the impossibility of either physical security or intellectual certainty in a world of entanglements.

The fourth chapter examines the desire to help those we see as victims of crisis or disaster, in particular through what we call humanitarian intervention. It looks at how such actions can perpetuate the very divisions that produce the problem in the first place. Through their reliance on a distinction between the human and the non-human, those politically qualified and those not, humanitarianism shares a secret solidarity with the exclusionary practices of the state and the coloniser. There is a tension, the chapter argues, between small actions, face-to-face, and the desire to do more: to change the world.

In the fifth chapter, I reflect on the work of memory scholars. Inspired by a reading of Chris Marker's film *La Jétee*, I explore concepts of time. *La Jétee* offers contrasting fantasies of the future, whilst also offering glimpses of a time that builds itself around us. I show that, despite the way Marker's film complicates notions of a linear temporality and a better future, those notions return to haunt much scholarship on memory. I draw on Eric Santner's notion of an escape – not *from* the everyday, but *into* the everyday – and ask whether such an escape is countenanced in the academic world.

The fulcrum of the book, around which the argument pivots, is Chapter 6. Like the first and last chapters, this chapter takes the form of an auto-ethnographic account. In the period between 2002 and 2009 I had made several visits to New York, and to Manhattan in particular. I was attempting to understand the response of New

Yorkers to the collapse of the Twin Towers. I was grappling with the idea of trauma time – the time of openness after an event that throws into doubt what seemed to have been certain – and its political implications. The visit I recount in Chapter 6 took place after a gap of five years, and proved to be a turning point for me, challenging what I had thought my work was about.

The three chapters that follow work within this altered view and examine examples of practice, academic and otherwise, in a different register. All three deal in one way or another with questions around disappearance and issues of presence and absence, individuality and connection. And all three, in their different ways, address the political demand for justice. That demand turns out to be not so much a demand to change the world, but a demand for recognition and acknowledgement of the world that there is, a demand that silenced voices count. Chapters 7 and 8 take as their concern enforced disappearance in Mexico and Chile. Chapter 9 examines the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017.

Chapter 7 examines two projects that work to support relatives in their demand for justice after enforced disappearances in Mexico: the *Huellas de la Memoria*/*Footprints of Memory* project begun by Alfredo López, and Forensic Architecture's *Cartography of Violence,* an interactive platform detailing the enforced disappearance of forty-three Ayotzinapa students. The two projects are very different, but both use and transform traces of disappearance to demand justice and both involve slow and painstaking work. Chapter 8 examines Patricio Guzmán's film *Nostalgia for the Light*, which is set in the Atacama Desert in Chile. The film juxtaposes the search of astronomers for the origins of the universe and that of archaeologists for the remnants of humans who passed through the desert – as well as the women who comb the desert floor for the remains of their disappeared relatives.

In Chapter 9, I contrast the slow violence of austerity, classism and racism with the swift justice that is meted out to Omega Mwaikambo, a Grenfell resident who took photographs of one of the people who jumped from the tower that night. I examine the 'blackening' of the community both before and after the fire and their ongoing search for justice and recognition. The chapter assembles traces from the public domain of what happened to Mwaikambo into a narrative account

that points to the complexities of the interactions between individuals, the police and the courts after the fire, and highlights the inadequacy of procedures for the identification of those who died.

The final chapter returns to a semi-autobiographical narrative to consider classism and racism against the background of a movement from one class to another and the dislocation that produces. It explores notions of misinterpellation – when someone responds to a call that they know is not for them – and how a refusal of interpellation can function politically as a decolonising move. If, instead of taking on the habits and values to which we are called, we retain our loyalty to the place we are from, whatever that might be, then we have the potential to resist interpellation's colonising move.

The monotheistic god's-eye view becomes difficult to sustain in the face of the vagaries and specificities of our own lives and their various demands and engagements. We are not separate, objective academics, gazing down at the planet and attempting to save it, but fragile, mortal beings who are part and parcel of the ecosystem, as well as of the geopolitical and family histories into which we are born.

And yet, it is very tempting to think otherwise. It is hard, especially for someone authorised as an 'expert', to give up on a fantasy that tells us that if only we had enough knowledge, of the right type, and could express it in the right way, and teach our students what it meant, then all would be well and a new world could be born. It is even harder to acknowledge that what many western academics do may actually be inhibiting the birth of that new world, whose contours we cannot even begin to sketch out. When we teach our students what we know, are we not teaching them stultification: that they cannot know anything without our help?[16] Are we not inducing a conduct that respects a particular divisive, raced, classed and gendered form of political organisation, even as we critique it, and producing a neo-liberal docile body that suits capitalism down to the ground? How can we do otherwise?

## Notes

1   John Berger, comment on back cover of Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago, 1986.

2   Gaston Bachelard, quoted in R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 1.

3   Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 5.

4   Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 6.

5   Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

6   Maja Zehfuss, 'What Can We Do to Change the World?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 483–501. London: Routledge, 2009: 611.

7   Naeem Inayatullah, 'Why Do Some People Think They Know What Is Good for Others?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 450–71. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014: 467.

8   Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantees.' *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 28–44.

9   David Scott, 'Stuart Hall's Ethics.' *Small Axe* 17 (2005): 1–16: 3. Original emphasis.

10  Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology', 43.

11  Scott, 'Stuart Hall's Ethics', 5.

12  Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

13  Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

14  Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

15  Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986: 109.

16  Stultification is Jacques Rancière's term: Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.

# I

# Objects among objects[1]

*I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.*

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*[2]

When she died in 1989 at the age of 101, my grandmother left few possessions. She had lived since she was in her sixties in a room in my parent's various houses, so there wasn't much space for personal property. Her most treasured objects were in a small black wooden box, and most prized amongst them were a few photographs. Black and white, of course, and most of them formal portraits or wedding photographs mounted on thick card. Encouraged by her granddaughter, she had written the names of those featured in the main family portrait: Lizzie, Father, Annie, John, Martha, Mother and Mary. In my conversations with her, the photographs would often be shown as we talked about her childhood, her three-mile walk over the moors to school, the times when she was sent to the pub to haul her father from his drinking and bring him home, and her work as a young girl in the Lancashire cotton mills. After her mother died, at the age of 48, the family moved to the seaside town of Lytham St Annes. Mary also died relatively young, nursed by my grandmother through a long illness, and Martha died in childbirth. Annie married a Catholic, and bore four surviving children, one of whom is my godmother and still lives in Lytham, where I was born, with her children and grandchildren. The only one of my grandmother's siblings I met was Uncle John, who, until his death, lived in the Lancashire textile town of Accrington with his daughter Cicely.

I never met either of my grandfathers. I have no memories of them, only photographs. The pictures of my maternal grandfather, Richard Smith, were among the most precious of the photographs carried by my grandmother through all the thirty-odd years she lived with my parents, my brother and me. As well as two portraits of Dick, as she called him, one full-face and one in semi-profile, there was a photograph of him in a bed in a field hospital at the front in the First World War. She also had his army papers. He served in the Lancashire Fusiliers for one year and 103 days, and was with the British Expeditionary Force from 13 March to 20 October 1917. His papers show that he was discharged on 8 June 1918, no longer fit for war service. He had been gassed in the trenches, and never fully recovered. He came home of course, and he and my grandmother were married in 1920. By 1925 he was dead. During that period the family moved back and forth between the industrial and shipping town of Salford, where Dick had worked before the war as a cotton packer, and Diggle, a village in Saddleworth on the Yorkshire moors, a short distance away from the smoke of the city, which he could no longer tolerate. My mother was born in 1922 in Diggle, and she was just two and a half when her father died. My grandmother was not entitled to a war widow's pension – the couple had waited until after his discharge before they married. She moved back to Lytham, to live with her father in Holmfield Road, and took work where she could find it, mostly as a housekeeper in local hotels, I think. This type of work suited her circumstances, though not her sharp intellect. With a child to raise, she turned down opportunities for more responsibility in favour of being able to look after her daughter, and, eventually, her sister Annie's sons and daughters too.

Many of us these days have far more than a few treasured photographs. Behind me as I write is a large wooden trunk, much larger than my grandmother's box, full of unsorted family snapshots. Elsewhere in the house are several albums. Drawers in a filing cabinet are full of the overflow from the trunk, and on my hard drive hundreds more images are stored. If they had to rescue something in a house fire, most people would choose the family photographs, such is their value and importance. In my case that would be difficult: I could hardly gather up the whole trunkful. I have been meaning for years to have a clear-out. But the reason I haven't done this is not just lack of time or

motivation. I haven't put any photographs in albums since my father died, suddenly, twenty-odd years ago. It seemed to me that if I looked at the photographs of him, I would somehow lose my memories of him as a physical, moving, solid being. And I wanted above all to retain those as long as I could.

What is most precious, and what is most lost when someone dies, is their physical presence: the smell of them, their flesh, the hairs on their arms, the look in their eyes. Even if – or, maybe, perhaps, especially if – the relationship was fraught and difficult. And it is hard that things – objects, furniture, jewellery, clothes, places – remain, mocking us with their indestructibility when compared with the frailty of flesh. I remember my father one time when he visited us – maybe even the last time – bringing a large suitcase up our narrow, winding stairs. I reached down to take the suitcase from him, and he was grateful. The stretch of his arm as he handed the suitcase to me, the look in his eyes – a touch of shame at his own weakness, and gratitude, even a pride in me – I still remember these. Another time I remember the huge strength of his concern – and the hug he gave me – as I was leaving for the hospital, in the advanced stages of labour with my second son. I remember thinking, 'If you don't let me go soon, your grandson will be born *here* in this hallway.'

A photograph is a strange thing, particularly a photograph of a person. On the one hand it is an object among other objects – to use Frantz Fanon's phrase – and it circulates, changes hands, is reproduced, enlarged, cropped, captioned, displayed, filed in an album.[3] On the other hand, it is very intimate, almost painfully so. If it is a portrait, and if the eyes look at the camera, then we have potentially the same feeling of intimacy of contact as when we meet someone's eyes face to face. They are looking at us as if we were the person in front of them – or the person behind the camera, the one taking the photograph. The illusion is amplified if, as I have done from time to time with old portraits where the negatives are long since lost, we take a photograph of the photograph. Looking through the lens as you focus carefully, it feels almost as though you are facing the original subject in person, there before you, summoned up like a ghost.

My father died on 1 February 1985. His time of death was recorded as 7.30 p.m., I learned later, but he died in hospital, having suffered

a massive heart attack. So I imagine that he had been subjected to several attempts at resuscitation. He began to feel ill at around 4.30 p.m., on a visit to the supermarket in Henleaze. My mother spent time driving him (slowly, very slowly) from their house in Westbury-on-Trym to see the doctor in Shirehampton. They returned home, having seen or not seen the doctor, I don't know, but not having had any help. My father felt terrible – he didn't know whether to sit up or lie down, or what to do. He got rapidly worse, and they finally called the ambulance. My mother didn't go with him, though I think he was still conscious then. She remained in the house to look after my grandmother. Eventually she called a neighbour to granny-sit and followed the ambulance down to the Bristol Royal Infirmary, but I don't think she saw my father alive again. My brother telephoned me at about 7.45 p.m. I remember most of all the conviction that I was in the wrong place: I had to go to Bristol. Nothing else mattered. I bundled my sons into their car seats (they were two and three years old and fast asleep) and we drove to Bristol at once – a two-and-a-half-hour journey. It's strange, the impact of a death. I must have been totally self-absorbed, because when we got to Bristol and my eldest son woke and asked eagerly 'Where's Grandad?' I couldn't think what to say. I hadn't expected that question.

In my own mind, trying to think through the shock during the course of that long journey, three things became perfectly clear. Decisions that had been forming, to do with my future academic work, where we should live, and my own political activism, suddenly clarified themselves. It was not a question of being brought up short and making time to consider important issues generally put to one side, though there must surely have been some sense that priorities had changed, rather it was just that there was no longer any need to doubt. What I should do became plain, all by itself. There really wasn't a process of deciding. That was what was so striking about it. There is no slow-motion version I can give, indeed there is no narrative time at all. I wanted to travel to Bristol 'instantly'. I mention the two and a half hours the journey must have taken, reminding myself perhaps that time did indeed elapse, but I suppose that in some sense I did transport myself from one place to the other in an instant, my body catching up with where my intention already was. And maybe the

process of deciding took 'time' – but it appeared to me to have been instantaneous.

My father's death confirmed me in my political convictions. The period 1984–85 was the time of the miners' strike and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's successful attempt to break the back of organised trade unionism in the UK once and for all and clear the way for privatisation, deregulation and the move away from the welfare state. It was also a time of intensified Cold War antagonisms and a real concern about the possibility of nuclear war, with a sharp escalation of the arms race. Cruise missiles were being installed in Europe, despite grassroots opposition. The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp had been established, and nuclear convoys were being tracked by pro-testers. The Ecology Party (later renamed the Green Party) had fielded 100 candidates in the 1983 General Election, including one in my own constituency, St Albans, and I had been active in the campaign. I was beginning to find my own way politically: prompted by the arrival of my two sons, politics suddenly seemed more important, activism a must.

My father had been an active supporter of the Liberal Party – and as a child I had delivered election leaflets with him – but I wasn't drawn in that direction. My own activism had been motivated in part by the recognition of the Green Party as my political home. I was sympathetic to its anti-nuclear, almost pacifist, stance. Economically it was left wing, and yet there was more: a belief in the local, the face-to-face, alongside a concern for the global, and a commitment to ecology – a deep ecology, involving an attitude and comportment towards the world as whole. And it confirmed me in my desire to escape Thatcherism. By then we had been contemplating for a while a move to Wales – to Aberystwyth in particular – as a way of leaving behind the sterile and heartless environment England seemed to be becoming under Thatcher. There was no such thing, she proclaimed, as 'society': individual effort and ambition should be allowed free rein. Looking after each other was to encourage dependency, and social welfare was an invitation to the profligate poor to abnegate any sense of self-responsibility. Neo-liberal market economics was all. The state was to be 'rolled back' – except of course that a strong state was essential in certain circumstances: the Falklands War being

the prime example. Socialism, unionism, nationalised industry – these were 'the enemy within'. In contrast, Wales was still, it seemed to us, based on different, what we thought of as more 'civilised', values of community and commitment. Culture, public service and community responsibilities were still taken seriously. People in Wales did not move every few years, following their careers; families remained in the same broad locality for generations. The sense of reciprocity and the need to compromise that went with a more settled commitment to place made for a different approach to life. And poetry, literature and art remained more central than money or possessions.

It also confirmed me in my decision to take a second undergraduate degree, a degree in the social sciences with the Open University. As a teenager, trying – as I thought at that stage in my life was necessary – to find my place in the world, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to find 'the source of the world', to use Fanon's words again.[4] I had no idea how to go about it. As to what I was going to 'do', what I was going to 'be', I knew nothing of the possibilities of an academic life, and nothing about the options of studying sociology or politics. I knew, so I thought, that I didn't want to be a teacher like my parents: I could not see myself standing up in front of a class. The closest I could get to studying something that would feed my intellectual curiosity at that point seemed to be the natural sciences. To find the source of the world meant to engage with the big questions about life, the universe and everything – and the natural sciences, as I had been taught them, certainly did that. By then, my choices were fairly limited anyway. My qualifications led neatly to degrees in mathematics or physics; I had been persuaded against studying English and history alongside physics at 'A' level at school. It wouldn't fit the timetable, for one thing. For another, it didn't make sense in terms of university entrance require-ments. My feeling that a broader, interdisciplinary approach would be more what I was interested in was not supported by the school. In the all-girls school I attended, it was taken for granted that a girl who could do science and maths should follow that track. It was also obvious to the school that anyone capable of it should be aiming for a place at Oxbridge, not at one of what were then the 'new' universities like Sussex or Keele, where disciplinary boundaries were no longer sacrosanct and exploration and innovation were encouraged. And of

course, it was good for the school's recruitment to be able to boast of the number of girls it sent on to Oxford and Cambridge. I did not have the self-confidence to make a stand on my own against these views, and there was no one I could turn to with the experience to support me – and of course, to be regarded as capable of getting a place at a prestigious university was flattering too. So, bowing to the inevitable, I applied to Oxford to read for a physics degree.

I had a wonderful time at Oxford. I punted on the river Cherwell, partied, and latterly, and rather briefly, spent ten weeks in my final year studying in the libraries in preparation for my examinations. But almost as soon as I had started at St Anne's, I realised my mistake: physics was not for me. We were spending our time reworking the physics I had already been taught, and whereas my physics mistress at school had taken us through the subject by following the sense of curiosity and adventure generated by the puzzles posed by trying to grasp the world, at college we focused in our first year on the detailed mathematical expression of the solutions that had been posited. My friends were historians, philosophers, political theorists – that was what I should have been doing. They were the ones encountering interesting new ideas and challenging debates. And my other enthusiasm, first fostered by a perceptive English teacher at school and many years as a season ticket-holder at the Bristol Old Vic, was in drama. At St Anne's, two of us set up a drama group in college and built a stage, and I played a series of parts in theatrical productions put on elsewhere. A change of course from physics to philosophy, politics and economics, or even to psychology and philosophy, was not countenanced by the college authorities: what I wanted to do was too difficult a move to make within the time span of my three-year grant, and there was not the tutorial support necessary. I had to continue and complete my physics degree, which I did. I attended sessions on the history of science in a basement room filled with astrolabes, and incomprehensibly dense lectures on the philosophy of science by Rom Harré. I took copious notes in a mathematical language I can no longer understand in lectures on nuclear physics and solid state electronics.

In my final year, quite unexpectedly, I recaptured the interest in the subject that I thought I had lost. Suddenly we were no longer

putting the mathematical underpinnings to ideas to which we had been introduced before, but rather reaching the boundaries of knowledge in nuclear, particle and high-energy physics. And what became apparent was the way in which knowledge was not what it was all about. No longer were we looking to find out what was happening in some world of which we were objective observers – objects looking at objects. Rather, we were attempting to think up pictures or models that would help us imagine what might be going on – and more than one picture seemed to be necessary. The world was not fathomable in one image. And, indeed, the world was not fathomable, full stop. It was not 'out there', waiting to be 'discovered': we were part of it and our observations as scientists changed the world we were observing. This was heady and exciting stuff, and my tutorial sessions in the eighteenth-century rooms of Christchurch College were purposeful and invigorating. The insights from that time continue to inform my theoretical orientation now, in a way that studying philosophy and politics in a very traditional context would never have done.

It was many years later that I had the opportunity to make the change of course I had tried to make at Oxford. My eldest son had just been born, and I had been made redundant from my job shortly before his arrival. After several fruitless attempts to find a similar job elsewhere, I finally began to look at the possibility of returning to study. The Open University proved the ideal institution for this move. It admits anyone and everyone – no questions asked, no qualifications required – that's one part of what 'Open' means. Its teaching is through course units sent out in the post, with complementary television broadcasts and radio programmes, monthly tutorial meetings held on Saturdays, and summer schools. It prides itself on being open in other ways too – to ideas of all kinds and to a range of teaching methods. It was the only option available logistically, since with young children there was no way I could get to any of the local universities, but it turned out that it could not have been more suited to what I wanted to do. I began with a foundation course in the social sciences – and immediately it was like coming home intellectually. This was where I had wanted to be. The teaching of Stuart Hall in particular was an absolute inspiration. Encountering Marxism for the first time was extraordinary: why had I not come across this before? Conversations suddenly made sense for

the first time. It was amazing. And at that point I knew that I would like to carry on – to do research. I went to see a university counsellor about it at one of the summer schools. I told him what I was thinking, and, bless him, his response was 'I don't see why not.'

At the time of my father's death, this was in the future, though: I registered for my first Open University course in March 1985. We stayed in Bristol for a fortnight or so after his death, dealing with the bureaucracy, organising the funeral and trying to support my mother and explain to the children what had happened. The funeral service was well attended: my father's work as a head teacher, hugely supportive of his students and staff and innovative in his approach, was widely respected. But then came the bombshell. During one of the many quiet conversations that took place over those weeks, my mother mentioned, almost in passing, two things, both to me totally astonishing, that threw into turmoil the memories I thought I had of my small, contented, 'normal' childhood. She told me that my father had been married before: my mother was his second wife. And she told me that his father – my grandfather – had disappeared, walked out on his wife and child, when my father was in his teens. None of this had I ever so much as suspected. I knew, or so I thought, that both my grandfathers were dead. Now it turned out that no one knew whether my father's father was alive or dead. I knew that my parents were very much in love, and their wedding photograph showed my mother looking young and beautiful in a dashing 1940s hat and dark dress. They had been married in a Registry Office, but of course it had never occurred to me that that was because, as a divorcee, my father couldn't remarry in a church. I had thought that it was just his beliefs – his atheism – that led them to avoid a church wedding. And I had arranged that my own wedding would be in a Registry Office too.

Nothing my father said on that occasion, or indeed any other, led me to suspect that he had more experience of marriage as an institution than I thought. Whole areas of my childhood, and whole undercurrents of the shame and secrecy that divorce entailed in those days, had been hidden from me – or, rather, not so much hidden, since I never thought that anything was mysterious or concealed, but just not known about. Children are logical beings, and they opt for the straightforward: they do not question what seems obvious. My

mother's quiet sessions in the bedroom sorting pennies into sections of a small blue cash box to try to stretch the weekly housekeeping was not just that my father's pay as a head teacher was low, but that he had to send regular payments to his ex-wife; my father's locked metal box kept under the bed wasn't just because he was well organised and tidy: this was where the documents relating to the divorce and the maintenance payments were kept; his lack of a university education was not through choice, but because his father had refused to support him; their move to Bristol from Lytham when my father got his first teaching job was not just a preference for the West Country over the North, where they were both from, but in part to escape contact with his former wife; and an absence in my childhood world of my parents entertaining friends and family and visiting relations in Lytham was not just because they were both only children: the reticence and diffi-dence it reflected could be traced in part to their situation.

This is how, eventually, I came to have a photograph of my paternal grandfather. Faced with the news that no one knew what had become of my grandfather, I determined to find out. There was a blind spot in my childhood – in my sense of self – and I wanted to fill it in. My grandfather could not be allowed to just disappear. My father had made no attempt to trace him: he had been a violent husband, and my father's young life had been spent protecting his mother from that violence. But I needed to know more. How could I understand my father and his all too violent concern for me if I did not know more of his father? It was not difficult to trace him, the missing grandfather. Absurd in a way, since we seem to spend all our lives trying to piece together traces of people we are close to in the hope of finding out who they – and we – are. Searches of the Register of Deaths in Somerset House showed that he had died when I was twelve. I managed to trace more of the family history – motivated now by all the questions I had failed to ask as a child, I combed the records for all branches of the family, on my mother's side as well, but in particular I traced those who had registered my grandfather's death. It turned out that he had gone back to his relations from Worcestershire, by then living in Birmingham. Finally, I tracked down the current phone number of a second cousin, who confirmed that he had known my grandfather in his later years, and who sent me a copy of a family

photograph. There was more – hints of a bigamous relationship and further children. I was offered the phone number of another cousin who would be able to tell me more. But there my curiosity ended. I'm not sure why. Maybe my seemingly endless trawling through the records was a little too disembodied: I could face the intellectual challenge of piecing together the fragments of family history from the archives. What I couldn't face was the prospect of an actual, physical encounter. I visited my grandfather's grave in Birmingham, and left flowers, alongside flowers left by someone else: I was not the only visitor to his grave. And I filed the photograph. I'm not sure it meant that much to me in the end. I wonder now why I had never asked before – at home, as a child – to see his photograph. Of course, there was no such photograph, but I do wonder what would have been the outcome had I asked the question and been told the answer, before my father's death.

Family photographs are brutally torn from their context and displayed for all to gaze on when tragedy strikes. When someone is missing, or when they are the victim of a crime, a family snapshot will be reproduced in newspapers or on missing-person posters – or, in the case of children missing in the United States in the past, on milk cartons. If the disappearance is part of a larger-scale catastrophe – the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, or the Asian tsunami of 2004, for example – the images will be displayed alongside those of other people's missing friends and relations. When large-scale disappearances are orchestrated by a tyrannical regime, blown-up pictures of those abducted and tortured are held aloft by people protesting the disappearances in demonstrations and marches.

Often genocidal regimes will document their practices, strangely enough, by photographing those they incarcerate or kill as part of the bureaucracy of genocide. Such was the case in Pol Pot's Cambodia and in Nazi Germany, for example. Even in liberal democracies, the mug shot has its function in recording suspects and criminals as well as controlling populations and their movements more generally through identity cards, passports and other documents. And when photography first became available it provided a means for administrators to record the features of different groups of people (the poor or the

deviant, for example), a technique soon taken up by anthropologists and travellers keen to capture the images of exotic peoples.

I am working at the moment on a book entitled 'Missing Persons'.[5] I thought I was working on a book about the portrait photograph, but the motif of the missing kept returning to haunt and distort that book. It was only belatedly that it occurred to me that I had a personal reason for my interest in this area, albeit in a very attenuated way. Most of those 'missing' whose stories I examine or will examine in the book are heartbreaking and traumatic in a way my own most definitely is not: I look at the missing in New York after September 11, and in London in the aftermath of the July 2005 bombings, and in Argentina. The first two are difficult enough, but in the case of the missing in Argentina (and other countries in Latin America), not only were people 'disappeared', but this happened in a context of fear, denial and silencing that made the suffering of those searching for relatives much worse. It is only now, some twenty years later, that many of the most difficult stories are beginning to emerge: stories, for example, of the children of the missing who were seized by those who had abducted their parents and adopted by families connected to or involved in the military regimes. It is only now that some of them have discovered their 'origins' and been reunited with their surviving blood relatives.

There is another way, of course, of thinking about our abiding interest in what I have just described as the heartbreaking and the traumatic. Our conversations, as well as our newspapers and news broadcasts, are full of tales of dreadful or even devastating events that happen to others. As I have argued in my other writing, events we call traumatic provide an opening for us to prise open the systems of oppression and depersonalisation that we live under – that we produce and reproduce for ourselves, of course: no one else is there to take responsibility.[6] It is probably a mistake to highlight the dramatic and the overwhelming, though: trauma is not absent from everyday exploitation. It is perhaps at the everyday level that it is most amenable to challenge, and at this level that finding a different way is most important. One of the most interesting aspects of the aftermath of the bombings in London a couple of years ago was the way in which people helped each other. While regulations prevented the

emergency services from attending the scene of the events until it could be confirmed that there was no further danger of explosions or risk of biological or chemical contamination, the people on the trains, and the train drivers, stayed with the injured, talking to them and helping where they could. We are encouraged to leave response to the emergency services, and accused of 'rubber-necking' when we don't, but it seems that the capacity to respond – person-to-person – remains.

It has taken a long time, surprisingly enough, for me to realise that an abiding concern in all my research from the start has been the question of the instrumentalisation or commodification of life. And it has taken perceptive friends to point this out to me. In my doctoral thesis, this concern with the instrumentalisation of life was expressed through the term 'technologisation'. In my discussion of famine, I argued that technical solutions to famine missed the point: to adopt a technical solution was to conceal the way that famines often arise through deliberate actions or inaction of people who are aware of what this will lead to. Famines are not so much a failure of a social or economic system, but rather its product – in some sense, they are a sign of its success. They are in large part the outcome of a system that enables the private ownership of the means of subsistence; people starve because they are dispossessed of the earth, if you like, not because of some natural calamity. And in a large part the aid that is offered to famine 'victims' compounds the error: people are treated as what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has aptly called 'bare life'.[7] Their lives are 'saved', but nothing is done to enable them to reinstate the way of life that was theirs before exploitation or brute force deprived them of it. They have no voice in the way in which they are helped; they are assumed to be helpless and apolitical. We judge what is best for them.

A similar approach is found in the treatment today of 'victims' of what we call terrorist attacks. There is no doubt of course that as far as those who carry out the attacks are concerned, for the most part at least, it does not matter who precisely is injured or killed in the attack. More often than not, it does not even matter what nationality, religious affiliation or class the victims might have. This disregard for the particularities of personhood is repeated by the authorities who deal with the aftermath of such attacks. We find, for example, to return to the London bombings, that many if not all victims were treated as

potential perpetrators – assumed guilty until proven innocent – and relatives and friends were deliberately kept in the dark about the fate of those missing for days on end, despite the obvious distress this caused. In New York, victims of the Trade Center attacks were co-opted into the Bush administration's campaign of vengeance and retribution against Afghanistan, and later Iraq. Their consent, or the consent of their families to this use of their names – to their invocation as heroes who sacrificed their lives for the nation in the newly declared war on terror – was not sought. They were treated not as persons with diverse political views but as lives lost, lives belonging to the nation-state.

Treatment of persons in this way – as objects – makes me angry, and motivates me to examine the system of social and political relations of which this treatment is a part. I am angry on behalf of my grandmother, whose life was constrained by her treatment – and that of her husband – as objects to be disposed of or used. I am angry on behalf of my father, whose childhood and later life were restrained by the way in which he was unable to admit to who he was. But both of them tried to find another way, and to some degree they both succeeded. My grandmother made a life for herself that had its own integrity and purpose. She didn't give up on her commitment to my grandfather, and she adapted, and flourished, in whatever situation she found herself. She didn't compromise on her strength or her independence. My father devoted himself to his students. He once described his work with children with what these days are called learning difficulties as an attempt to discover, as one might with a machine, what had gone wrong and hence how to put it right. But his work belied this approach. Throughout my childhood, his pupils would call him at home to seek help – they would come round to the house, and he would go to them. He insisted that the system be adaptable, and fought against regulations that prevented him from doing what he thought would be best for each person. And every Christmas, he would carefully choose and wrap individual presents for each of his staff. His funeral was testament to the regard in which he was held – as a person.

It is no longer my aim, as it once was, to seek the origin of the world. The desire that motivates my work now is a desire to contest

the way in which people become objects among other objects. At the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon remarks that he wants 'only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another … Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?'[8] In Marx's analysis of alienation, Foucault's description of disciplinary practices and technologisation, and Derrida's call for a justice beyond the law, a justice answerable to the absolutely other, we find a series of ways of approaching this question.[9] In my work at the moment I am approaching it through an analysis of the way in which 'personhood' as such is missing in today's politics. For me injustice lies in the objectification of human lives – the treatment of people by each other as nothing more than identical figures in a population that is to be administered or made secure, a treatment sometimes so rule-bound and heartless that it has no space for exceptions, for difference, for concessions, for understanding and, importantly, for the acknowledgement of the impossibility of ever fully understanding.

It is this impossibility of full understanding that is perhaps most important here. As my friend and co-author Véronique Pin-Fat often reminds me, the person as such must and always does remain missing. In the process of attempting to write this account of how my intellectual pursuits might relate to my life more broadly – to draw back some of the veils that we normally, as academics, draw over such things – something has changed. Prompted by Naeem Inayatullah, my extraordinary editor, to delve more and more into aspects that I wanted to move past quickly, I have come to understand my own motivations and limitations more closely. However, I still do not in any sense fully grasp what I am about, or who I am; in any case, as my student Marie Suetsugu relates in her doctoral thesis – itself an attempt to transgress the boundaries between the academic and the personal – in telling an autobiographical story we are necessarily concealing as well as revealing.[10] In the Lacanian sense I suppose, the veils do not conceal anything but the fact that behind the veils there is nothing: the person is missing.[11] As I write this, it seems that a more modest motivation than that I identified just now is appropriate: not the desire to somehow achieve a world where the tool never possesses the man, but rather what Fanon describes, maybe somewhat disingenuously,

as the 'quite simple attempt', on an everyday level, to make time for the endeavour to attend to and to open to the 'other' – and the other within the self – alongside an appreciation, and a willing assumption, of the impossibility of ever succeeding.[12] The anger dissipates, to give place to, or, more appropriately perhaps, to give birth to, a more tempered and more careful sensibility.

A few days ago, my mother showed me a letter, written to her by my father shortly after my brother had been born. My brother was premature, and initially not expected to survive. The letter was touching, full of my father's love for his wife and his six-year-old daughter – he was looking after me alone, presumably for the first time, and had just tucked me up in bed – and hope for his new son. He spoke of his plans for the future, for the move back to Bristol from Darlington that the family was about to make, how sometimes he felt he wanted to push things on, while at others he thought he should let them take their course. He wondered how things would turn out.

The letter showed me a father I had hardly known: reflective, emotional, full of feeling. It also showed him as an intellectual: I remembered the books, few in number, but challenging and wide-ranging, on his shelves. He had been too diffident to parade his intellect at home. I am my father's daughter, nothing more, despite any feeling of having made my own route in the world. And, possibly, hopefully, I am my father's daughter in other ways too. That's how things have turned out, in one small area at least.

*Aberystwyth, 2007*

## Notes

1  I would like to thank Naeem Inayatullah for bringing new ways of writing to international relations scholarship, and for the time and generosity he puts into supporting those who attempt to write autobiographic or narrative accounts. I am grateful to him for suggesting that I write this chapter, and for his marvellous editing. The chapter was originally published in Naeem Inayatullah, ed., *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

2  Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986: 109.

3  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

4  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

5  Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

6  Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

7  Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

8  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

9  David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, 1991; Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority".' In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell and Michel Rosenfeld, 3–67. London: Routledge, 1992.

10  Marie Suetsugu, 'Dividing Practices and the Subject of Development.' PhD thesis, University of Aberystwyth, 2007.

11  Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989: 193.

12  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

# 2

# Intellectuals as experts[1]

*Those who are charged with saying what counts as true*
                                              – Michel Foucault[2]

As I am writing this chapter, the news is heartbreaking: floods in India, Nepal and Bangladesh displacing millions and killing thousands – a taster of climate change to come; the resurgence of fears of nuclear war and ill-chosen jokes about Armageddon from those who have not experienced this fear as real; a US president who equates armed neo-Nazis in Charlottesville with anti-fascist protesters and sanctions police brutality; a UK prime minister who imposes austerity on the vulnerable and disabled at home and turns away those fleeing war abroad; and universities capitulating to a regime of targets and managerialism without a fight. And what are scholars doing in the face of all this? What can we do?

In February 2003, Steve Smith gave his Presidential lecture at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, meeting in Portland, Oregon. He courted controversy by arguing that scholars of international relations were complicit in singing into existence a world in which the events of September 11 could take place. He pointed out that 'the social world … is not something that we observe, it is something we inhabit, and we can never stand in relationship to it as neutral observer'.[3] Of course, as mentioned in the previous chapter and discussed more fully in the next, neither is the 'natural' world. The two cannot be distinguished in any case. Smith called on us not to evade our inevitable ethical responsibility but to speak truth to power, whilst at the same time quoting Max Weber on the dangers of political intervention: 'whoever wants to engage in politics at all … lets himself

in for the diabolical forces lurking in all violence'.[4] The previous year's convention, the first since September 11, had been surprisingly silent on the implications of the events of six months before. It was almost as if nothing had happened. On the flight home from this one, people were animated: trying to persuade themselves that Smith could not have been right – or that if he was, he shouldn't have used his speech to make this point.

What is the responsibility of intellectuals more generally? To what extent can work arising from academia have relevance to the practical political choices faced by policy-makers and others on a daily basis? With science, the relevance can be clear, as in the case examined in Chapter 3, but for those in the arts and humanities it is less so. How best can concerned academics intervene in the politics with which they would so like to be involved? Or, indeed, are they already deeply implicated in that politics, as Smith argues, so that the question of intervention does not arise?

There are two related but distinct preliminary points that are worth making. First, as Smith pointed out, intellectuals are of course not as separate from political and social structures as might seem to be the case, or as they might like to think. Antonio Gramsci addresses the question of whether intellectuals are 'an autonomous and independent social group', as they so often appear.[5] He argues against looking for criteria that distinguish intellectuals as such 'in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations'.[6] We should focus not on what defines an intellectual but rather on what categories are historically made available for intellectual activity and how struggles for dominance between different groups or classes can be conceived in these terms. He distinguishes *traditional intellectuals*, on the one hand, who have an apparent neutrality and absence of class-belongingness, but whose status and authority derive from their historical position and whose role is as 'the dominant group's "deputies", exercising the … functions of social hegemony and political government' and *organic intellectuals*, on the other, who are part of a subaltern group or class that is engaged in a struggle for dominance.[7] Traditional intellectuals are those who are

commonly recognised as intellectuals: academics, writers, scientists, and so on. Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, though not recognisable as intellectuals, articulate the 'new modes of thought' of their group.[8] Organic intellectuals serve to disrupt rather than reinforce the prevailing hegemony.

The second preliminary point is that contemporary intellectuals in the Western context operate within a particular '"regime" of truth', one that constitutes as 'truth' knowledge that is the product of scientific methods of working.[9] Michel Foucault argues that the figure of what he calls the *specific intellectual* is of central importance in present-day struggles. Specific intellectuals – and Foucault points to atomic scientists as the prime example – who have a 'direct and localised relation to scientific knowledge and institutions' constitute a political threat because of their ability 'to intervene in contemporary political struggles in the name of a "local" scientific truth'.[10] In other words, because of their status as experts, and despite the fact that 'the specific intellectual serves the interests of state or capital', they remain in a strategic position to intervene on behalf of local struggles.[11] There are dangers, of course: the risk of remaining at the level of local struggles, of manipulation or control by other interests, and of not being able to gain widespread support. Nevertheless, the specific intellectual should not be discounted. What is important is the relation between 'truth' and power, and the way in which

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[12]

Foucault argues that, in contemporary Western societies, the dominant regime of truth is centred on scientific discourse and the institutions that support it. The specific intellectual has a particular class position, as Gramsci noted too, and particular conditions of work, but more than that, a particular connection to the way that the politics of truth works. This position gives such an intellectual the possibility of

struggle at the level of the regime of truth. Of course, because 'this regime is not merely ideological or superstructural [but] a condition of the formation and development of capitalism', interventions that challenge the regime of truth constitute a challenge to the hegemony of the social and economic system with which it is bound up.[13]

It is in this context of a particular, scientific regime of truth and the role of the intellectual that I discuss two examples. First, I elaborate on a point raised in the previous chapter: how the academic search for 'causes' and 'solutions' operates in the case of famines and how it can prohibit change. Second, I look at an example of the backlash that happens when a scientific expert attempts to contest political conclusions that claim to be drawn from their expertise. The role of the intellectual, both Gramsci and Foucault have argued, can be central to change and contestation, but it can also be part of the structures that prohibit change and keep existing systems and problematisations in place. If social-scientific analyses and direct political interventions can be counter-productive, what are the alternatives? What are academics to do? The second part of the chapter puts forward some suggestions.

## Causes and solutions: famine

Framings that prevail in much academic or intellectual work – even that of a so-called critical bent – are of a distinct type, and the narratives that they produce limit what can be achieved in practical, on-the-ground terms. They can even be argued to perpetuate, or even give rise to, the 'problem' to which they attempt to provide a 'solution'.[14] Is a search for causes and solutions in some way constitutive of the very problems that analysis purports to attempt to resolve?

There are two ways of interpreting this question. First, it can be read as asking whether what academics propose as causes originate from the analysis of what is happening (in other words, were the causes there already, waiting to be identified and analysed), or whether they come from the imagination of academics and only later are found in what we call social reality. In other words, did the theorising of academics predispose them to find certain things 'out there' in the real world and thus prompt behaviour of a type that then made the real world appear to be as the academics had proposed? To put it simply,

is academic theorising a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does the way we see the world, influenced at least in part by academic analyses, affect how we act in the world and thus produce a world that resembles academic theorisations?

These questions, although interesting, are still framed within a very particular way of thinking, one that operates with an assumed separation between the 'thinking' academic and 'the world'.[15] They raise the question of whether intellectual analysis in the social world can be seen as independent or whether it should rather be regarded as constitutive of the world. There is a strong argument for the latter position. Adopting this view brings into question a scientific regime of truth, since such a regime depends on notions of objectivity.

However, alongside this first concern there is a second. To what extent does the way in which 'problems' are approached have a specific impact too? Is it just the question of objectivity that is problematic here? Or is the search for causes and solutions itself a very particular form of academic analysis, and one that has certain implications? The idea that wars or famines, for example, have causes, and that if we could understand what those causes were we could remove them and put an end to the 'problem', reflects a specifically modernist, Western, academic approach, where answers are sought in technical terms. The point is that even if it is accepted that theories in some sense constitute the world, it is still often tacitly assumed that that 'problems' exist 'out there': solutions may be problematic in terms of objectivity or the impossibility of separating theory from practice, but often the existence of problems themselves (war, famine) to which 'solutions' are sought is not questioned. It might be useful to examine this further.

Much of the literature on famines, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, is centred on the idea that famines are a technical problem. They have causes, and we can end famines through scientific, social scientific or economic research. The assumption is that if we can find out what the causes of famines are then hopefully we can remove them. Early accounts that constitute 'famine' as an object of study in relation to 'population' – Malthusian accounts – regard famine as an almost inevitable consequence of population growth. If human populations expand (it is taken for granted in these accounts that they will, and at an increasing rate), then the size of the population will at some stage

outstrip the growth in food production, which takes place, according to these accounts, at a slower pace.[16] Famines will then occur that will bring population and food supply in line again. Arguments like this in terms of population growth and resources have been made in relation to conflict and genocide as well as famine.[17] They are similar to views that see famines as the consequence of environmental degradation or climatic factors.

There are two problems with these accounts. First, they set to one side the way in which 'famine' as we think of it now is produced as an object of study at a particular historical point and represents a specifically Western view.[18] In the accounts discussed above, there is an assumption that famines are a 'natural' phenomenon. This way of looking at famines has been disputed for some time, and the view that famines are man-made strongly argued.[19] However, even among those who want to emphasise political, structural or economic causes rather than climatic or environmental ones, there remains a sense that famine is an appropriate object of analysis, and that the causes of famine can be understood in terms of scientific, social-scientific or economic laws. Secondly, there is an assumption that famines take place because of a failure: they happen because of a breakdown of agricultural systems, or a failure of social support systems, or a problem with economic resources.[20] If we can find out what the cause of this failure is then we can act to put it right. However, famine is not something that just happens: in many cases it is not a failure, but rather a process of exploitation or even, in some cases, a deliberate act akin to a genocide.[21] It is also a process with beneficiaries as well as victims: while some starve, others make profits because of increased prices of foodstuffs, or by taking the land of those who emigrate, for example.[22] By treating it as a phenomenon that has 'causes' we are taking out the politics involved. Famines are not just things that happen because the rain fails or because the potato becomes diseased. They are more complex, and more political, than that. They happen because particular people take particular forms of action – when they could do otherwise.

In sum, what this way of thinking does is constitute famines as events that have causes, and that most usually can be seen as the failure or breakdown of an otherwise benign system. They close off the

possibility of seeing famines as events, like genocide, for example, that involve the particular actions or inactions of certain people, people who could in some instances at least be held responsible for what happens. It does not recognise that there will be those who will resist any attempt to put in place solutions that propose such things as welfare systems to cushion the poor in bad times or aid provided in such a way that it cannot be exploited by the parties to a conflict. It is assumed that everyone is behind the effort to make sure that famines do not take place, and that all that is missing is the know-how to do this. It forgets that very many people benefit in a wide variety of ways from the system as it stands, a system that effectively produces famines. Famines are arguably the product of the system rather than of its failure.

Thinking in terms of causes and solutions, then, is an approach that in the case of famines makes it impossible to see certain aspects of the situation. It makes the politics of what is going on invisible. This blind spot then means that the search for 'causes' or 'solutions' is more than just constitutive of the reality it aims to reflect. This approach is complicit in perpetuating the very thing it seeks to 'end'. Seeing famine as a failure or a breakdown limits the questions we ask. We need to look at the politics of it, not just treat it as a problem, a technical malfunction of an otherwise benign system. Treating famine in this way enables the economy of oppressions and benefits that surrounds it to continue. We need to consider the possibility that famines happen because the social and political system in which they are embedded is working *all too well* rather than because it has failed.

## Expert evidence: Dr David Kelly

In Anglo-American culture at least the intellectual is often synonymous with the expert: someone who has technical expertise and whose knowledge can be called upon to replace a political decision. Often if experts can be said to agree, political debate is closed down or even pre-empted altogether. The stakes are high in these manoeuvres. As politics specialists we are accustomed to talk of power relations, but perhaps less experienced in dealing with them: in coming up against those we censure. We may critique – others will try to disparage or close down our criticism.

Dr David Kelly was a UK weapons scientist who made a series of political interventions that were controversial and contested, and that eventually led to his death in July 2003. An inquiry was set up, chaired by Lord Hutton.[23] Unusually, at that time, the inquiry made public through the internet many of the documents that were submitted.[24] Although the hearings were not televised, dramatised extracts based on the transcripts were shown each night. Despite the intricate questioning, the detailed scrutiny of every move that was made in Whitehall, Downing Street and the BBC, and the pages of evidence placed in the public domain, the eventual report was widely regarded as a whitewash. Many commentators noted that the conclusions of the report did not seem to reflect the evidence. In the end the whole affair – Kelly, what he did and why – did not seem to make sense.

In brief, Kelly was a senior UK scientist closely involved with weapons inspection programmes in various countries and peripherally involved in the compilation of the so-called dossier that the Blair government published in September 2002, ostensibly to make public the intelligence on which its case for an attack on Iraq was based.[25] In May 2003, after the invasion of Iraq had taken place – and at the point where it was becoming apparent that no weapons of mass destruction were going to be found – Kelly began a series of conversations with journalists during which he is said to have claimed that there was political interference in the wording of the dossier. Members of the Downing Street team had influenced the content of a document supposedly compiled by the intelligence services. When a BBC radio broadcast featuring journalist Andrew Gilligan and based on one of these encounters was aired it caused a furore. The Blair administration responded strongly to the accusations levelled against it. The BBC stoutly defended its journalists and refused to name its source. It then appears that Kelly wrote to his line manager at the Ministry of Defence volunteering that he had spoken with the press, but claiming that he was not the sole source of the BBC's story. He appeared before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, at that point denying explicitly and in public that he was the supplier of information that he had indeed, it later emerged, conveyed to Susan Watts, a correspondent with BBC *Newsnight*. A few days later he was dead: his body was found on the

outskirts of woodland a short distance from his home. He seemed to have committed suicide.

Expert testimony and scientific knowledge is generally regarded as true, objective and incontestable: it cannot be challenged, except by another expert. David Kelly's role as a technical expert was, or should have been, to prevent or pre-empt the possibility of political discussion. What he in fact did in his briefings of Andrew Gilligan and Susan Watts could perhaps – and this, like so much else about the affair, remains unclear – be seen as an attempt to enter the political arena and open a debate. In other words, contrary to the expected role of the expert – closing down debate – Kelly attempted the reverse. His claim was (or appeared to be) that there had been political interference with the expert judgements of the intelligence community. The interesting thing was that in making this claim he himself had also crossed a boundary: he had made use of his status as expert to enter the political fray. More ironically even, it was his taking of his status as an expert literally – in other words his belief in the impartial, apolitical nature of the expert – that led him to protest the contamination of that expertise with political manoeuvrings or changes of emphasis. What had happened, then, was that the boundary between politics and the expert had been thrown into question by one person's movement across that boundary. This revealed the way in which 'expert advice' is employed in political debate as a closing down of possibilities.

The response to Kelly's death was swift and decisive. It culminated in the announcement of an enquiry 'into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly'. What did this announcement do? One interpretation would be that what it did was to divert attention again from the political question concerning the justification for the Iraq war to technical questions of what was done in relation to Kelly and his revelations. This happened not just because the inquiry's particular terms of reference were too narrow, in that they did not include any reference to whether or not the attack on Iraq was justified, but because of the way the inquiry worked.

In the course of the inquiry, Kelly's intervention was depoliticised and invalidated in a number of ways. First, his evidence was discredited: it was said that he was not involved in the relevant meetings, he could not have been speaking from first-hand knowledge, and so

forth. Second, he was presented as a victim: he was painted as stressed, overwhelmed, and out of his depth. This meant that his suicide (if that is what it was) was to be seen as the desperate act of someone weighed down by his own personal situation and not in any sense a political act. Finally, the focus of the enquiry was on how he was treated as an employee: his pension rights, his terms of contract, and what his duties included. By focusing on technical questions and by casting Kelly in the role of victim his political intervention was invalidated.

The inquiry's effects need not have been unambiguously one-way. The detailed, step-by-step unpacking of what had happened, hour by hour, in this small segment of bureaucratic life was fascinating. The evidence that was produced and made public revealed a process of decisioning and politics that is generally concealed. But finally, though it remains there in the evidence, the enquiry and its report took a path that again concealed political decisions behind a smokescreen of expert knowledge: the suicide expert, the personnel officer, the pathologist.

Kelly's dilemma perhaps was that he believed in the role of the expert, and yet he wanted to move outside that role himself. To set things right, he had to be other than he was.[26] We do not have a satisfactory explanation of why he committed suicide, if indeed that is what happened. The narrative that came out of the inquiry is deeply unsatisfactory. However, Kelly's death perhaps did more than is admitted. It prompted an inquiry (maybe two, if calls for an inquest are eventually allowed to proceed) and unsettled the narrative that the Blair administration was attempting to impose.[27] Perhaps, and what follows has to be no more than speculation, Kelly, the weapons inspector, chose to weaponise his own body. He was someone familiar with (and perhaps even in possession of), the tools of assassination and someone supremely skilled in the forensic detection of cover-ups. By the apparent manner of his death he posed questions of intelligibility that remain as yet unanswered. He set the scene on Harrowdown Hill to resemble the scene of a simple suicide and yet to reveal, on closer examination, that the apparent manner of that suicide seemed an impossibility. If this is the case, he both retrieved his integrity and confounded his political opponents through the manner of his death.

Several books have been written in succeeding years, and conspiracy theories abound.[28] However, according to Norman Baker, 'the aftermath of David Kelly's death presented Tony Blair's government with his greatest political challenge', especially since it 'returned the political focus firmly onto Iraq'.[29] It arguably led to the Chilcot Inquiry. W.G. Runciman writes:

> Thanks to Hutton … we now know things about the workings of power in the run up to the invasion of Iraq for which historians might otherwise have had to wait for decades, and it is up to their commentators, whether journalists, politicians, or academics, to use the evidence they have made available to draw conclusions which they have not chosen to draw themselves.[30]

The unintelligibility of Kelly's death is reminiscent of the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, described by Gayatri Spivak in her paper 'Can the subaltern speak?'[31] Spivak's question could be rephrased: Can the 'expert' or 'intellectual' subject constituted within and constitutive of relations of power and knowledge have a critical voice?[32]

Spivak examines the custom of widow immolation or *sati* in India, and towards the end of the essay turns to the case of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri as a different example of female suicide.[33] Bhuvaneswari was found dead in 1926, having hanged herself. However, the reasons for her suicide seemed unclear. It was not a case of illegitimate pregnancy: she was menstruating when she died. Not until nearly ten years later was it discovered that Bhuvaneswari had been recruited as a political assassin in the struggle for Indian independence. Unable to carry out her task, or reveal it – perhaps she also could not in the end be other than she was – but unwilling that her suicide be seen as the result of a forbidden love affair, she waited until menstruation before killing herself. This was both a reversal of the custom that a widow had to wait until the end of bleeding before self-immolation, and a specific refusal of the most likely interpretation of her death. Spivak is ambiguous in her conclusion. In one sense 'the sexed subaltern subject' had 'spoken'; Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri 'perhaps rewrote the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way'.[34] However, Bhuvaneswari's suicide remained a puzzle at the time, and found no place in the

memories of the independence movement. It is remembered today by her family as a simple case of illicit love. David Kelly's family continue to insist that his death was suicide caused by his fear of losing his job and his pension.[35]

### What are academics to do?

If the search for causes and solutions can be counterproductive, and if speaking out against powerful forces can be manipulated and misinterpreted, what are academics to do? One possibility, as mentioned in the case of famines, is to pay attention not to causes but to functions: to look not at what causes a famine, war or conflict, but who it benefits and how. How does constituting something as an object of analysis produce certain effects?

When Foucault examined prisons, he was interested in the way they always appeared to fail: a large proportion of people who had been imprisoned reoffended.[36] Despite the fact that numerous enquiries and reports pointed this failure out, the prison system, whose supposed purpose was the re-education and reform of prisoners, continued without significant alteration. However, according to Foucault the failure of the prison could be seen as pointing to a positive function. The prison system worked to depoliticise a whole underclass of people who were labelled delinquent and thereby denied a political voice. As Foucault puts it:

> If the law is supposed to define offences, if the function of the penal apparatus is to reduce them and if the prison is the instrument of this repression, then failure has to be admitted … *But perhaps one should reverse the problem and ask oneself what is served by the failure of the prison* … If so, one would be forced to suppose that the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them … The differential administration of illegalities through the mediation of penalty forms part of … mechanisms of domination. Legal punishments are to be resituated in an overall strategy of illegalities. The 'failure' of the prison may be understood on this basis.[37]

David Keen, as we saw, applies a similar approach to the study of famines. He looks at the functions of famines, at who benefits and how. He concludes that famines function to perpetuate a system of oppression that benefits a range of people, from local actors to members of the international community.[38]

As well as looking at the possible functions of an 'event', there is a parallel move that presents itself if we are to give up on the counter-productive search for causes and solutions: the need to become more specific. We need to look closely at the detail. This second move also draws on Foucault. To uncover the functions of, for example, the prison, he demands that we pay attention to what he calls subjugated knowledges and detailed genealogies.

By subjugated knowledges, Foucault has in mind two things. First, the rediscovery of what he calls 'historical contents'.[39] By this he means a rediscovery of the history of struggle and conflict that the systematising thinking that goes along with the search for cause and effect disguises. Linear narratives of cause and effect superimpose on a messy history a retrospective story, produced in the main by the political victors. Recovery of the detail of events, in contrast, demonstrates that the outcome was hardly ever as inevitable as it might appear in retrospect and that struggles contain violence and illegality that are later disowned or suppressed. This rediscovery of the history of struggle takes place through exacting, meticulous historical scholarship.

Second, he includes marginal knowledges, in other words, knowledges that have been disqualified or regarded as insignificant. These are not a general common-sense knowledge in the Gramscian usage, but in some ways quite the opposite: a 'particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it'.[40]

These two lines of attack put together, then, lead to the approach he calls a genealogy: 'the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today'. What such a genealogy does is

entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, dis-
qualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary
body of theory which would filter hierarchies and order them
in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea
of what constitutes a science and its objects. Genealogies are
therefore not positivistic returns to a more careful or exact form
of science. They are precisely 'anti-sciences'.[41]

This is, of course, not an easy enterprise. It is a struggle against forms
of power that go along with certain forms of (scientific) knowledge,
which, as we have seen, entails a challenge to the social and eco-
nomic systems that grew up alongside and depend upon such forms
of knowledge or such particular 'regimes of truth'. The dominant
regime of truth fights back: often, 'no sooner are fragments of geneal-
ogies brought to light than they are re-incorporated into the unitary
discourses that previously rejected them'.[42] Genealogy is a process of
resistance and repoliticisation that has to be repeated time and time
again.

   To what extent can these genealogies and subjugated knowledges
be found in the local context, and to what extent is it helpful perhaps
to locate 'events' in their global context? Susan Buck-Morss, in her
book *Thinking Past Terror*, writes of the global public sphere in
a post-September 11 context. Most interestingly, the question that
fascinates her is not dissimilar to the question of the universalising ten-
dency of certain approaches to theorising that I have been discussing.
She considers what form of engagement there might be with Islamist
political thinking, and calls for nothing less than a rethinking 'of the
entire project of politics within the changed conditions of a global
public sphere'. She says:

> We co-exist immanently, within the same discursive space but
> without mutual comprehension, lacking the shared cultural
> apparatus necessary to sustain sociability. We are in the same
> boat pulling against each other and causing great harm to the
> material shell that sustains us. But there is no Archimedean
> point in space at which we could station ourselves while putting
> the globe in dry-dock for repairs – no option, then, except the
> slow and painstaking task of a radically open communication

that does not presume that we already know where we stand.[43]

There are problems with the implication that a fully open communication might be possible, but Buck-Morss appears to acknowledge that difficulty. She continues:

> Rather than forcing the homogeneity of differences under over-arching rubrics of human universality … the incoherence, the ruins, the ruptures in the global terrain [must] remain visible.[44]

This is interesting first, because she is emphasising, as Foucault does, how an overarching theoretical or other stance can be damaging – and she is doing this not in a local but a postcolonial, globalised context – but second, because she calls for the ruins to remain visible. There is no point in papering over the cracks with a veneer of 'solutions' or a claim to universality.

Just as Foucault is calling for a recovery of the buried memories of struggles, so Buck-Morss demands that the ruptures and the gaps remain visible, whilst at the same time a form of dialogue is attempted. This notion of keeping the gaps or the disruptions visible is what I want to examine a little further.

### Remaking the world

Messy questions are inevitably concealed in searches for causes and solutions. Such searches assume they know what the problem is and focus on the need to solve it, not on the results or implications of what is happening or has happened. They ignore the way in which it is often difficult even to describe fully or coherently what has in fact happened, let alone subsume it under a label: for example, calling something 'a famine' is deeply problematic.[45] Seeking academic theories that will account for conflict, famine and the like in terms of cause and solution involves concealing struggle and contestation, and hiding the fragility of anything that might be called a solution. Both involve grand narratives, whether grand theoretical narratives or grand narratives of statehood. They also involve hiding the vulnerability of life itself,

and this, of course, is part of their appeal. And maybe it is part of why people like me become academics, as my account in the previous chapter perhaps reveals.

Elaine Scarry contrasts practices that 'make' the world, practices like making a coat to keep out the cold, for example, which are practices where the sentience or feeling of the human body and its frailty are taken into account, with the violence of torture and war, or other forms of violence which 'unmake' the world. A woman making a coat, for example,

> has no interest in making a coat per se but in making someone warm: her skilled attention to threads, materials, seams, linings are all objectifications of the fact that she is at work to remake human tissue to be free of the problem of being cold. She could do this by putting her arms around the shivering person … but she instead more successfully accomplishes her goal by indirection – by making the freestanding object which then remakes the human site which is her actual object … The coat-maker … is working … not to make the artefact … but to remake human sentience … She enters into and in some way alters the alive percipience of other persons.[46]

Making the world is a slow, painstaking process – like the processes of detailed genealogies of struggle or the determination to engage in dialogue while not forgetting the ruptures that accompany difference.

A slow, meticulous process of remaking occurred in New York City after September 11. Gangs of firefighters and others worked in the recovery effort, sifting through the rubble left after the collapse of the World Trade Center in Manhattan.[47] In the early pictures, we see them working in human chains, moving the rubble piece by piece, searching for human remains. The workers in New York were endeavouring to separate the remains of the built, insentient structure from what was left of sentient human beings who had been in the buildings at the time of their collapse. There was, of course, no way in which those human remains could be used to remake living human beings. All that could be done was a lesser form of remaking: identifying and giving a name to those who had disappeared. In the end, of course, even

that was to prove impossible for many of the people who had been lost.[48] The unbuilding of the World Trade Center Towers was taking place alongside a reassertion or remaking of the distinction between sentience and non-sentience.

As time went on, large construction machines were brought in to make the effort more efficient and speed things along. This led to protests and confrontations between different groups on the site. For the firefighters the most important thing was the recovery of the remains of their colleagues – they wanted to continue to discriminate between human remains and rubble, and had a personal stake in the process. The city authorities were more concerned to speed the procedure of unbuilding the World Trade Center and remaking the city environment as ordered and under control.[49] The DNA identification of those killed could, as far as the city authorities were concerned, take place later, when the remains of people and buildings had been removed together to the Fresh Kills waste site on Staten Island. During the protests at the actions of the authorities feelings ran high. At one point, firefighters were arrested for trespassing on the site. At an emotional confrontation at the Mayor's office, one widow remarked: 'Last week my husband is memorialized as a hero, this week he's thought of as landfill?'[50] In the end a compromise was reached. The crane known as 'Big Red' was removed from the site, and a number of firefighters allowed to return.

The remaking of the world takes time, and cannot be hurried. The unmaking of the world brought about by violence of one sort or another can only be undone by a slow painstaking remaking. This remaking, piece by piece, is similar to the process of a careful, sited listening called for by Fiona Sampson, a listening that requires attentiveness to differences and difficulties that cannot be replaced by abstractions.[51] Les Back stresses the value of slowness of pace in his discussion of a global sociological imagination, which entails 'an attention to the implication of our most intimate and most local experiences in planetary networks and relationships'. A form of active listening is required 'to admit the excluded, the looked past, to allow the "out of place" a sense of belonging'.[52] In concluding, Back describes such an academic practice as 'a resource of hope'.[53] I return to this thought in the concluding chapter.

### Conclusion

In the end, perhaps, the responsibility of the intellectual, if he or she is to resist the closure that comes with the status of 'expert', is to refuse to give an easy, generalising answer to a political question. In other words, the task of the intellectual is to not cover over the impossibility of answering. However, this means the intellectual must do the impossible: both be an intellectual *and* refuse the role of pundit and the status of expert. This fidelity to the crack is a stance of dis/engagement, a repudiation of claims to technical knowledge by the person who is considered to have such knowledge.

Contemporary regimes of truth, based as they are on scientific approaches as the validation of what is to count as true, operate largely, at least in the social sciences, with approaches that seek to find causes and solutions to 'problems'. This type of approach prevents the raising of questions of politics and responsibility. We saw that it does not engage with the possibility, raised by Foucault, that such 'problems' or 'failures' may in fact be a sign that the function of the practice in question is not what it seems at first sight. It is necessary to ask what the process functions to sustain and how, and who benefits.

If we are to avoid talking in terms of causes and solutions, or adopting uncritically the role of 'expert', how are we to proceed? If confronting the system head on, speaking truth to power as Smith might put it, is risky and unlikely to succeed, do we keep quiet? One possibility is to undertake detailed genealogies and bring to light local knowledges that together reveal hidden histories of struggle that can be deployed tactically. At a global level it becomes necessary, as Buck-Morss argued, to undertake an inevitably messy and incomplete attempt at dialogue, an attempt that recognises from the start the slow and difficult nature of such an undertaking. Grand theories of cause and solution can be counter-productive. What is required, perhaps, are local and located processes, and a cautious, gentle and meticulous engagement in remaking the world.

## Notes

1   The chapter draws together and develops elements of two embryonic essays: Jenny Edkins, 'Ethics of Engagement: Intellectuals in World Politics.' *International Relations* 19, no. 1 (March 2005): 64–9; and Jenny Edkins, 'The Local, the Global and the Troubling.' *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (2006): 499–511.

2   Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power.' In *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow. Vol. 3: Power, 111–33. New York: The New Press, 2000: 131.

3   Steve Smith, 'Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11.' *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2004): 491–515; 513.

4   Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation., In H.H. Gerth Mills and C. Wright, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge, 2007: 77–128; 127.

5   Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971: 5.

6   Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 8.

7   Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 12.

8   Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 9.

9   Foucault, 'Truth and Power', 132.

10  Foucault, 'Truth and Power', 128–9.

11  Foucault, 'Truth and Power', 130.

12  Foucault, 'Truth and Power', 131.

13  Foucault, 'Truth and Power', 132.

14  See, for example, on the production of the crime of 'mugging', Stuart Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. N. Clarke and B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978.

15  Maja Zehfuss, 'What Can We Do to Change the World?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 483–501. London: Routledge, 2009.

16  T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Translated by Patricia James. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, edited by Raymond Geuss and Quentin Skinner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

17  Peter Uvin, 'Reading the Rwandan Genocide.' *International Studies Review* 3, no. 3 (2001): 75–99.

18  Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

19  For an early example, see, Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons for World Hunger*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

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# 3

# The final core of uncertainty[1]

*We do not know how to predict what would happen in a given circumstance, and we believe now that it is impossible… that this is the way nature really is.*

– Richard Feynman[2]

Approaches to the social world that attempt to adopt a scientific method and identify cause and effect to try to solve problems and to predict future outcomes draw on a Newtonian cosmology. This view of the world treats objects as distinct, independent of observation, and existing before they interact, and time and space as an external background to action. It is the framework in which straightforward ideas of cause and effect such as those discussed in the previous chapter make sense. It arose alongside the changes in forms of political community that led to the modern state, individualism and ideas of the independent existence of objects that still underpin much contemporary thinking.

For anyone brought up as a physicist, as I was, such ideas are counter-intuitive: a fantasy that belongs to a particular world. Contemporary cosmologies based on relativity and quantum physics that arose in the early years of the twentieth century take as accepted among other things the impossibility of independent observation, the straightforward existence of objects, or a defined temporality, and this is the picture of the world that makes sense to me. It is also a picture of the world as fundamentally interconnected, a notion expressed perhaps most clearly by Fritjof Capra, whose book, first published in 1975, draws connections between modern physics and Indian and Chinese philosophy.[3] As Karen Barad puts it, much later, 'Existence is

not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.'[4]

Common sense has yet to catch up with early twentieth-century science, and quantum physics in particular.[5] Current notions of security, for example, still employ notions of the subject or object of security that draw on earlier cosmologies, and scholarship in international relations in particular tends to follow suit. There have been some noteworthy if controversial attempts to address the implications or uptake of quantum physics in other fields by various thinkers, including, for example, Barad, in her *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Gavin Parkinson's historical analysis of the uptake by surrealists of relativity and quantum physics in the 1920s and 1930s, and Roger Penrose's explorations of how quantum entanglement might provide an account of the human mind.[6] International relations scholars have recently ventured in this direction too.[7] Often these attempts provoke disputes over who has the 'correct' readings of quantum mechanics, and of course challenges to any attempt at what is seen as incorrect analogical thinking or 'scaling-up' are common.[8] Attempts to make social sense of quantum physics are by no means new; Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall's *The Quantum Society* was first published in 1993.[9]

This chapter does not attempt to set out a quantum theory of the so-called social world. It has a much more modest purpose. It explores the discontinuities between, on the one hand, the portrayal of security still common in international politics or security studies, and quantum cosmologies on the other, and argues that the idea of security is deeply, and dangerously, embedded in Newtonian thinking. It asks in what way, and with what result, ideas of security and notions of subjectivity and sovereignty would be changed if a cosmology that recognised the 'final core of uncertainty at the heart of things' were taken seriously, and it examines why the disjunction persists.[10] It uses a reading of Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen* to explore these issues.[11] The play juxtaposes competing narratives of a meeting that took place in Copenhagen in 1941 between nuclear physicist Niels Bohr, his former student Werner Heisenberg, and Bohr's wife, Margrethe. Frayn draws parallels between the impossibility of knowing certain properties of physical particles simultaneously and

the impossibility of knowing people's thoughts and intentions – even our own.[12] I am not so concerned with the applicability or otherwise of these parallels, or whether Frayn might be read as being too kind to Heisenberg (a question that absorbs many of Frayn's critics), as with the way the play, as I read it, exposes how the search for certainty, and the corresponding search for security, are untenable, dangerous, and yet powerfully seductive. Bohr himself thought that the implications of quantum physics could best be brought into the wider culture, not by scientists or philosophers, but by creative writers. Frayn's work seems to prove the point.[13]

## Copenhagen, 1941

Niels Bohr was widely recognised as one of the greatest physicists of the century, alongside Einstein, and Werner Heisenberg had been his young collaborator. By 1941, in the middle of the Second World War, it was some time since they had seen each other. Bohr was living in occupied Denmark, and Heisenberg worked as a scientist under the Nazi regime in Germany. Their days of collaboration were over. But in the autumn of 1941, Heisenberg travelled to Copenhagen to give a lecture. He also arranged a meeting with Bohr. The purposes and outcome of this meeting have been the subject of much speculation and curiosity ever since.[14]

Interest focuses on the role each of the protagonists was playing in the development of the bomb. In 1941 both the Allies and the Germans had teams of nuclear and atomic physicists engaged in work that could lead to the development of nuclear weapons. By 1942, both sides were involved in a contest to produce a bomb based on the principles of nuclear fission, a weapon that would give whoever won the race a decisive military advantage. The understanding of the workings of the nucleus had been developed over the previous decade, beginning with the discovery of the neutron in 1932.[15] Bohr and Heisenberg had both contributed to the theoretical development of this area of physics. Experimental work ran in parallel. Crucially, in 1939, it was realised that the splitting of the nucleus by a single neutron – the process called fission – was accompanied by the release of two or more neutrons and huge quantities of energy. These newly

produced neutrons could then go on to interact with – and split – further nuclei of uranium, producing the possibility of a chain reaction since the number of atoms involved doubled each time. However, the free neutrons produced would not fission other nuclei in uranium 238, the isotope that makes up 99 per cent of natural uranium. They will fission only the nuclei of the uranium 235 isotope, which makes up the other 1 per cent. By the time that war broke out, the only remaining questions seemed to be whether, and how, it might be possible to turn the possibility of a self-sustaining chain reaction into practice. What quantity of fissile material would be required? And how difficult would this be to produce?

This was more or less still the context when Heisenberg visited Bohr in the autumn of 1941. Heisenberg was under surveillance by the Gestapo, as was Bohr. Why did they meet? And what was said? Most importantly, what was Heisenberg hoping to achieve by the meeting, and what can be deduced from this about his role in German attempts to build the bomb? Was Germany's failure the result of deliberate and clever stalling on Heisenberg's part, an intervention that would have been, on the face of it, more risky than David Kelly's attempt to expose the Blair government discussed in Chapter 2, or did he not succeed because he just did not understand the physics? Michael Frayn's imaginary re-enactment of the encounter addresses these questions.

As the action proceeds, the three characters, all now ghosts – the action takes place after they are all dead – re-enact the events of that night in 1941. Three alternative fictional scenarios are presented. They are not separate but weave and interweave into each other. Each begins as Heisenberg approaches the house: 'I crunch over the familiar gravel to the Bohr's front door, and tug at the familiar bell pull … The heavy door swings open.'[16] In the first scenario, Heisenberg comes to see Bohr to warn him of the existence of a German nuclear programme, and to find out whether the Americans are doing the same. He asks Bohr 'if one had the right as a physicist to work on the practical exploitation of atomic energy'.[17] His hope is to persuade the scientists working with the Americans to try to delay the programme by emphasising the difficulty of separating uranium 235. In this scenario, this was what Heisenberg was doing in Germany: keeping control of

the programme, but making sure that it did not succeed. The German project was a reactor that would produce plutonium that could then be used for weapons, in place of uranium 235. Heisenberg asked for so little money that the project was not taken seriously.

The second re-enactment gives Margrethe's interpretation of what Heisenberg's motives were. She sees him as 'back in triumph – the leading scientist in a nation that's conquered most of Europe … come to show us how well [he's] done in life',[18] and come to let them know he is in charge of a vital secret piece of research – and yet has preserved a lofty moral independence, and has 'a wonderfully important moral dilemma to face'.[19]

The final scenario presents Frayn's own interpretation of the meeting. In this last re-enactment, it is not so much why Heisenberg has come to Copenhagen that matters, but how Bohr responds to his question, 'Does one as a physicist have the right to work on the practical exploitation of atomic energy?'[20] By saying absolutely nothing – he terminates the conversation and the meeting there and then – Bohr avoids prompting Heisenberg to make the calculation about the critical mass required for a chain reaction in uranium 235: the amount of pure uranium 235 that would be required to keep a chain reaction going long enough for it to become explosive. If Heisenberg *had* made the calculation, he would have realised that the task was by no means impossible. The amount required was not around a ton, as Heisenberg thought, but a few kilogrammes. The historical record appears to show that he did not make the calculation until the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.[21] He 'hadn't consciously realised there was a calculation to be made', and according to Frayn's final scenario, Bohr deliberately left him in his state of ignorance.[22]

## Uncertainty and complementarity

The re-enactments are fascinating, and raise challenging questions of motive and morality. But the play leaves us questioning more than what the purposes of the meeting were. In the end Frayn is less concerned with the purpose behind Heisenberg's visit, or with establishing what happened or who was responsible, than he is with exploring how the answers to any of these inevitable questions could

never be known for certain. This is what the play chooses to focus on, and it is this aspect that is useful for my reading of ideas of security. The play examines whether thoughts and intentions can be precisely established. Frayn draws a parallel between the uncertainty principle in physics – as formulated by Heisenberg – and the interpretation of human actions.

The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics which Bohr and Heisenberg had worked on together involved two principles – the uncertainty principle and complementarity. In classical Newtonian mechanics the assumption is that if we know the state of a system at some point in time, we can predict what its state will be at some future point. Systems comprise objects or bodies which are independent of each other and interact according to physical laws. Two separate systems will behave completely independently. In quantum mechanics, the new mechanics that was derived from studies of the atom and the nucleus in the early years of the twentieth century, it became clear that there were phenomena which it was 'impossible, *absolutely* impossible, to explain in any classical way'.[23] Bohr was one of the first involved in this work. His suggestion that the electrons orbiting the nucleus in an atom moved discontinuously from one state to another, or as is often expressed, 'jumped' from one orbit to the next, emitting discrete packages or 'quanta' of energy, was the beginning of quantum theory. Bohr realised that 'this break with the classical scheme – he called it the quantum postulate – implied that the description of atomic systems required a deep readjustment of how we are to understand the classical mechanical "pictures" of particles or waves moving through space and time'.[24]

The uncertainty principle formulated by Heisenberg was a statement of this distinction between classical and quantum mechanics. It reflected the fact that it had proved impossible to devise experiments to measure things on an atomic scale without at the same time influencing the things that the experiment was designed to measure. In particular, it was impossible to measure the position and momentum of a particle at the same time with more than a limited degree of accuracy. In the words Frayn gives to Heisenberg, it was

the strangest truth about the universe that any of us has stumbled on since relativity – that you can never know everything

about the whereabouts of a particle, or anything else … because we can't observe it without introducing some new element into the situation … You have no absolutely determinate situation in the world, which among other things lays waste to the idea of causality, the whole foundation of science – because if you don't know how things are today you certainly can't know how they're going to be tomorrow.[25]

Bohr's concept of complementarity added a vital supplement to this principle, or rather, provided an alternative and potentially more challenging and more fundamental formulation of the same thing. The principle is remembered as particle-wave duality. But it was much more than the idea that sometimes an electron, for example, behaves as a wave and sometimes as a particle – which tends to lead to the notion that these two pictures can be used interchangeably. One can choose whichever suits the situation. However, Bohr's argument was not that we could use whichever of these classical models we liked. He noted (and these are his own words this time) that 'radiation in free space as well as isolated material particles are abstractions, their properties on the quantum theory being definable and observable only through their interactions with other systems'.[26] In other words, classical concepts are idealisations: nature is not like that.

Although the uncertainty principle clearly does not apply directly to our observations of thoughts and intentions, Frayn argues that 'what the uncertainty of thoughts does have in common with the uncertainty of particles is that the difficulty is not just a practical one, but a systematic limitation which cannot be circumvented'.[27] It is not just a question of not being able to get inside other people's heads – we cannot even get inside our own. Indeed, our own motivations and thoughts are perhaps the most elusive of all, since we do not see ourselves doing what we do as a result of those thoughts, whilst others do, as Margrethe argues in the play.

## Surveillance, subjectivity, social order

In Michael Blakemore's production, the set is minimalist. It consists of a circular stage with three upright chairs, one for each of the three

protagonists: Bohr, Heisenberg, and Bohr's wife, Margrethe. There is a single entrance to the circle, at the centre back of the stage. The remainder – apart for the side where the audience is sitting – is surrounded by a high, circular backdrop. On the top of this, looking rather like jury benches in a court room, are two semi-circular rows of seats, filled during performances by members of the audience. They are there not only to observe the action but also to enable us to see ourselves watching it: they are our mirror. We become participants in the action. During the course of the dialogue, the actors circle and re-circle the set.

The play is about observation, performance and the uncertain production of self and social order. To take observation first.[28] There are a number of levels of surveillance built in. First of all, there are representatives of the audience on stage. Then there are the frequent references in the dialogue to the possibility of Gestapo microphones: the characters take a turn around the garden when they have anything important to say. Third, there is the figure of Bohr's wife. She is both protagonist and observer. Regarded by the other two as their audience – 'We're going to make the whole thing clear to Margrethe' – she is 'watching every step', and in the end she voices her own scenario.[29]

However, it is not just a question of watching or being watched. We may be being watched, and those watching what we do may find it almost impossible to determine our thoughts or motives. They cannot predict what will happen next because they do not know with any certainty what is happening now. They can hazard a guess, however. But how are we to know what our own thoughts might be when we cannot even see ourselves?

In the final re-enactment at the end of the play, this is brought out clearly. Heisenberg arrives at the Bohrs' house once more, 'blinking in the sudden flood of light from the house. Until this instant his thoughts have been everywhere and nowhere, like unobserved particles, through all the slits in the diffraction grating simultaneously. Now they have to be observed and specified.' Heisenberg reflects on this:

At once the clear purposes inside my head lose all definite shape. The light falls on them and they scatter … How difficult it is to see even what's in front of one's eyes. All we possess is the

present, and the present endlessly dissolves into the past. Bohr has gone even as I turn to see Margrethe … Margrethe slips into history even as I turn back to Bohr. And yet how much more difficult still it is to catch the slightest glimpse of what's behind one's eyes. Here I am at the centre of the universe, and yet all I can see are two smiles that don't belong to me.[30]

The only solution to this latter conundrum, the only way we can see ourselves if you like, is reflection. There are two forms. One source of reflection is a mirror, of course: in the play Heisenberg catches a glimpse in the mirror of a third smile, and 'an awkward stranger wearing it', who he speculates could be him.[31] The other source is the gaze of other people. Bohr glances at Margrethe and for a moment he sees what she can see and he can't, the smile vanishing from his own face as Heisenberg blunders on through the opening civilities. When Heisenberg looks at the two of them looking at him he suddenly sees 'the third person in the room as clearly' as he sees them. But this is only a fleeting glimpse, and one he makes no sense of.

The notion that we only exist to ourselves as a person or a subject if we are involved with others, so that we can see ourselves reflected in their gaze, is found in Lacanian approaches to subjectivity. For Lacan, the so-called mirror phase marks the entry of the subject into the imaginary order.[32] By catching sight of oneself in the mirror, or in the gaze of another person, one has a glimpse of oneself as a whole, as a separate individual interacting with other separate beings. However, for Lacan – as in Bohr's quantum mechanics – this is an illusion, or rather, an abstraction. It is a mis-recognition of who or what we are. It is imaginary. Despite the appearance of wholeness and of control, we remain fragmentary creatures subject to all sorts of intersubjective forces rather than complete, self-contained entities in charge of our actions.

In Lacanian thought there is a second stage in the production of subjectivity – which doesn't displace the imaginary but is added to it – the entry of the subject into the symbolic or social order. It is crucial to mention that this is not in any sense a question of an interaction between a pre-existing subject and a society or social order outside the subject which is always already there. As with the wave/particle

in Bohr's quantum mechanics, it is only when the process has taken place that the two are produced as apparently separate states. The entry into the symbolic produces both the subject as subject (as 'I') and the social order as such. It is a process seen by Lacanians as having a peculiar temporality. The symbolic order does not exist before the subject. It only comes into being when it is posited by the subject as already existing. In other words, the subject produces the social order by behaving as though it were already there. Although this act of presupposition is an act for which there is no firm basis – there was no way in which it was known in advance that it would work – once it *has* worked it produces the illusion that the subject and the social order have always been there – as separate, distinct entities. Individual subjects and the societies made up of groups of such individuals seem to be separate entities based on firm foundations.

There is one further important thing to note about the production of self and society in the Lacanian view – and this is where the approach is particularly helpful in the analysis of security. Neither the subject nor the social order is complete or closed. There is always a lack or an excess that is produced by the very process of the production of these entities: the world does not neatly fit the socially and linguistically determined categories available. The categories are never sufficient to capture all the complexities and nuances involved. Like the notions of wave and particle, where neither is an adequate description, something is always left out. However, this lack or gap is concealed, hidden by what Lacan calls the master signifier (its masculinity reflecting the patriarchal structure of societies like the modern West). The master signifier is what temporarily holds the symbolic order together in a particular form. It is what makes it meaningful. Like power relations, as we saw in the previous chapter, it is productive as well as controlling. It produces a social field within which subjects can take their place. The master signifier is arbitrary – anything will do, any individual or object can occupy that position in the structure. Examples include divine providence, the invisible hand of the market, the Jew, the objective logic of history, patriarchy.[33] In the contemporary world, the nation and the state take on this role.

### Security, trauma, desire

The implications of these ideas of the formation of subjectivity for notions of security are clear. Lacanian approaches teach us that every subject is incomplete, structured around a lack or an antagonism. As such it is *in its very character* insecure. This insecurity, like uncertainty in the case of particle physics, is not something that can be got around, some sort of temporary hindrance that can be overcome. It is something that is inherent in the nature of the world, if one accepts the Lacanian view. Not only is every subject incomplete, so is every particular social or symbolic order. There is always some lack or excess around which that order is constituted, a lack which is concealed by the presence of a master signifier. It has to be concealed for what we call social reality – or what Slavoj Žižek calls social fantasy – to work.[34]

When a security issue arises, what is happening is not that external threats are being recognised or new dangers assessed. It is something quite different that is taking place. The inherent insecurity in the object concerned – generally the state – is being concealed. When something is impossible, one way of concealing that impossibility is to shift the blame somewhere else. During the Cold War, state insecurity in the West was blamed on the Soviet Union. The West would have been secure but for the Soviet threat. The impossibility of security appears contingent. If only we can get rid of the current impediment, we can achieve a secure world. Another example of course is the rush to the discourse of security after September 11. The events of that day made very clear the impossibility of providing complete security for people and state institutions on the US mainland. But rather than admit that impossibility as structural, and work within it, the state moved immediately to declare war. The war is again supposed to produce what has always been and will remain an impossible fiction: security.

In the face of a traumatic event such as September 11 the status of the social or symbolic order – and the fiction of security – becomes apparent. Trauma involves the experience of overwhelming shock, terror or brutality – as in violent events such as a train accident, shell shock in wartime, or a natural disaster – when human beings are faced with the limits to their existence as subjects. It is an encounter with what Lacanians call the real – that which cannot be symbolised, which

simply means the lack or excess that is produced when the symbolic order is put in place. The re-enactments in Frayn's play are punctuated by flashbacks to the traumatic death of Bohr's son Christian, who was drowned when he fell from a boat his father was sailing: 'those short moments on the boat, when the tiller slams over in the heavy sea, and Christian is falling. … Those long moments in the water … . When he's struggling towards the lifebuoy. … So near to touching it.'[35] Trauma is an instant when two parallel worlds – like the parallel worlds of quantum physics – are divided by a decision, a moment that cannot be identified, seen, or accounted for. It is a limit point, and it cannot be spoken. It is Derrida's mystical foundation of authority, or *coup de force*.[36] An encounter with trauma makes the insecurity of existence inescapable.

For Bohr and Heisenberg the ramifications of uncertainty for the physical world are clear. In the end it is Margrethe who takes the implications to their fullest extent at the human level. 'You want to make everything seem heroically abstract and logical,' she complains to Bohr, 'And when you tell the story, yes, it all falls into place, it all has a beginning, a middle and an end. But I was there, and when I remember what it was like, I'm there still, and I look around me and what I see isn't a story! It's confusion and rage and jealousy and tears and no one knowing what things mean or which way they're going to go.'[37]

What happens if there is no longer an audience, either? Again, Margrethe is the one who points out that Heisenberg and Bohr have been working on 'a more efficient machine for killing people [one that] may yet kill every man, woman, and child in the world'. If this were to happen, then 'Even the questions that haunt us will at last be extinguished. Even the ghosts will die.'[38]

As we have seen, Frayn has drawn a parallel between the uncertainty principle in physics and the interpretation of human thoughts and actions. I want to draw a parallel here between the search for certainty that drives much human action and the search for security. Why do we need the fiction of security? Like the notion of certainty in science, it leads to possibilities of prediction and control and in that sense can be seen to serve to preserve existing relations of power. Is there more to it than that? What makes it so compelling to us, even as

we glimpse the problems with it in the faces of those whose security is compromised by our own privilege?[39]

If we return to the play, we see the protagonists circling and re-circling as they formulate and reformulate different possible answers to the question of what exactly happened on that night in 1941 in Copenhagen. It is not an abstract intellectual discussion however. It is a question of the production of each individual as a character in the drama, with a particular role to play: Bohr as 'a good man from first to last', for example, Heisenberg as the 'clever son'.[40] And observation has a vital role to play. Without an audience, none of this could happen. It isn't just that *we behave differently if observed*, like the sub-atomic particles whose actions are disturbed by an attempted measurement. It's that *we behave to be observed*: to produce ourselves as subjects within the social or symbolic order. Without the audience, we are nothing.

The audience is the one to whom the performance is addressed. Reformulating this in Lacanian terms, it is the social or symbolic order that is produced and reinvented in each of the stories of the Copenhagen encounter, and which each of the stories invokes. Like the Archimedean point, the symbolic order is crucial in any conceivable scenario. Without it no story is possible. We have seen in the Lacanian account how the social order is of necessity incomplete, but how this is concealed to enable the social fantasy within which we live to carry on. In the imaginary realm, we have a vision of our completeness as subjects produced at the mirror stage. It is the role of desire that impels us to search endlessly for such impossible wholeness once more. This desire is what lies behind both the desire for certainty and firm, established knowledge built on secure foundations, and the desire for security itself. But it is a desire that both requires and is thwarted by the social or symbolic order.

It requires it, in that the production of a coherent self relies on the production at the same time of a coherent social framework. The two are inseparable. However, we are not all similarly placed as actors in relation to the audience, or as subjects in relation to the symbolic order. As I have noted, the particular structure of the social order in the contemporary West is a patriarchal one, or to use the terminology, it is phallogocentric. As Luce Irigaray argues, 'from a

feminine locus nothing can be articulated without a questioning of the symbolic itself'.[41] For those positioned 'outside' by the symbolic order, whether by virtue of gender, race, sexuality, disability or otherwise, the question of subjectivity is from the start more complicated and more ambiguous than in the case of those privileged by it. There is no simple way in which they can take up a subject position outside the symbolic order (there are none). And there is no way in which they can be secure within it in the way some white, heterosexual men may be, for example. For Irigaray, for women to take their place alongside men they would have to 'challenge *the very foundation of our social and cultural order*, whose organisation has been prescribed by the patriarchal system'.[42]

Would it be overwhelming to exist without the shelter of a social fantasy? Such an existence involves facing on a day-to-day basis questions many of us prefer to forget, if we can. What would a world where the impossibility of security was acknowledged be like? Or one where the impossibility of certainty that quantum physics proposes were taken seriously and absorbed into our everyday cosmology? The two questions are very similar: both involve a similar shift in world view. This alternative vision is extensively adopted and explored in popular culture. The events of September 11, for example, were in a sense not completely unexpected, although they were uncanny in that something familiar only in the imagination was taking place in reality.[43] However, for the new cosmology to be adopted and acknowledged in the public sphere would involve a shift away from the notion of state and individual upon which that sphere is currently based. It would entail the development of a new vision of political community, one that was not based on the coming together of discrete particles to produce closed political systems.

## Afterlife

The play has had its own afterlife, one that in many ways reinforces Frayn's arguments. As Matthias Dörries remarks, the play 'engendered another drama, this one among historians [who] mounted a public spectacle with newspapers, journals and colloquia as their stage'.[44] More importantly, original primary documents emerged as a result of

controversy the play aroused, including unsent letters from Bohr to Heisenberg, released in 2002, and letters from Heisenberg to his wife Elisabeth, made public in 2003.[45] Amidst all the attempts by historians to pin events down and draw conclusions, these letters show yet again the impossibility of doing so.

The Bohr family were the first to respond to the play by the addition of new documents to the historical record. Robert Jungk's book *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, an account of the development of atomic weapons during the war published in 1957, contained a letter from Heisenberg to Jungk giving his version of the 1941 conversation with Bohr.[46] In this letter, although Heisenberg admits that 'I may be wrong after such a long time', he recalls that the conversation started with his question 'as to whether or not it was right for physicists to devote themselves in wartime to the uranium problem'. Heisenberg recalls Bohr's 'slightly frightened reaction', and his counter question as to whether Heisenberg thought fission could be used for weapons. Heisenberg goes on:

> I may have replied 'I know that this is in principle possible, but it would require a terrific technical effort, which, one can only hope, cannot be realized in this war.' Bohr was shocked by my reply, obviously assuming that I had intended to convey to him that Germany had made great progress in the direction of manufacturing atomic weapons.[47]

Heisenberg says he tried to correct this impression, but 'probably' did not succeed, and was left 'very unhappy about the result of this conversation'. His letter to Jungk is carefully phrased, but Jungk chose to reprint only part of the letter in his book.[48]

The appearance of the Dutch translation of the book containing this letter prompted Bohr to attempt to draft a letter to Heisenberg to try to set the record of their meeting straight. Though several drafts were written over the period between 1957, when Jungk's book was published, and 1962, when Bohr died, the letter was never sent and its contents not made public. The documents were eventually lodged in the Bohr archive and embargoed, with the rest of the papers, until 2012, fifty years after Bohr's death. The embargo was lifted by the Bohr family in 2002, as a result of the controversy and speculation aroused

by Frayn's play. They are published, with introductory comments by Finn Aaserud, in Dörries's book *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*.[49]

The letters are remarkable in many ways. As Dörries observes, the release appeared to have confirmed holders of opposing positions in their views, and, far from settling the historical debate, 'it has given it wings'.[50] His volume documents some responses. Frayn himself responded to the publication of the letters, and the criticisms excited by his play more broadly, in a new post-postscript, a version of which appeared in *The New York Review of Books*.[51]

The various drafts that Bohr wrote are a remarkable attempt to put in writing as clear an account of what happened, and his disagreement with Heisenberg's version, as he could. In the first draft, written around 1957, a sense of his anger is palpable. Bohr writes, 'I remember every word of our conversations. ... In particular, it made a strong impression both on Margrethe and me ... that you ... expressed your definite conviction that Germany would win.' He goes on:

> I also remember quite clearly our conversation in my room at the Institute, where in vague terms you spoke in a manner that could only give me the firm impression that, under your leadership, everything was being done in Germany to develop atomic weapons. ... I listened to this without speaking since [a] great matter for mankind was at issue. ... That my silence and gravity, as you write in the letter, could be taken as an expression of shock at your reports that it was possible to make an atomic bomb is a quite peculiar misunderstanding, which must be due to the great tension in your own mind.[52]

Bohr continues, saying that it was clear from 1939 onwards that he himself realised that an atomic bomb was possible, and that 'if anything in my behaviour could be interpreted as shock, it did not derive from such reports but rather from the news, as I had to understand it, that Germany was participating vigorously in a race to be first with atomic weapons'. Despite the assertion with which he began, Bohr concludes, 'All this is of course just a rendition of what I remember clearly from our conversations.' The letter was never sent.

In draft letters written on the occasion of Heisenberg's sixtieth birthday in 1961 (but again never sent), Bohr is more circumspect. He notes that he has been asked by many for an account of events during the war, and he writes, 'I have felt how difficult it is to form an accurate impression of events in which many have taken part.' He expresses the hope that 'we shall soon have the opportunity to talk in more detail about such questions, especially in connection with the visit by you … to Copenhagen in 1941, the background and purpose of which I am still being asked about'.[53]

Although these letters were never sent, the two did talk after the war. Bohr was clearly dissatisfied with these conversations, and resumed his attempt to put something in writing to Heisenberg. He writes in the final unsent draft, dated March 1962, 'As you know from our conversations in the first years after the war, we here got quite a different impression of what happened during this visit than the one you expressed in Jungk's book.' He goes on to say, 'Naturally, we all understand that it may be difficult for you to keep track of how you thought and expressed yourselves at the various stages of the war, the course of which changed as time passed.'[54] However, despite this concession, Bohr is convinced his own recollection is not at fault in the case of the conversation they had at the Institute, 'during which, because of the subject you raised, I carefully fixed in my mind every word that was uttered', and he sets out what was said. He concludes the letter, 'I have written at such length to make the case as clear as I can for you and hope that we can talk in greater detail about this when the opportunity arises.'[55] It appears that it never did.

Both Bohr's drafts and Heisenberg's communication with Jungk give an account of not only what was said, as they remembered it, but also of what they each thought the other was thinking. Both seem convinced that their own interpretation of events must be correct, though each admits that often memory and perceptions may be misleading. Bohr in particular says he hopes that if only they could meet and talk face to face at length, all could be settled, and a more certain version of events established – whilst at the same time implying that what needs to happen is for Heisenberg to be convinced of his error.

A further release of historical documents followed that by the Bohr archive: the release of letters exchanged between Heisenberg and his

wife Elisabeth, including one written by Heisenberg during his 1941 visit to Copenhagen.[56] These were later edited by Anna Maria Hirsch-Heisenberg and published in English in 2016. She writes in her preface from Feldafing in June 2011:

> When my mother died in 1998, I inherited two carefully wrapped bundles of letters: my father's to her and hers to him. At my mother's wish, the letters came to me as eldest daughter. Around this time the debate about my father's role in World War II was rekindled, partly prompted by Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen*; thus I decided to take a closer look at the letters.[57]

The new letter clarifies some of the practical details: where they met and when, and who was at the meetings, but says nothing about the content of the more 'political' or scientific conversations. In his account of the journey and his arrival in the familiar city, Heisenberg remarks on how 'everything has stayed so much the same as if nothing out there in the world had changed'. He appears surprised, though, by 'how much hatred and fear has been galvanised here', given that, as he sees it, everyone in Copenhagen 'is living exceptionally well'.[58]

Cathryn Carson, in her biography of Heisenberg, which focuses on the postwar period, cautions against thinking that we have got 'a grip on the man'. She argues that Heisenberg 'did not let himself be easily read in any, particularly public, circumstances. … More than that, in most things that mattered, he went out of his way to put a layer of distance between what he might think and what he might say.'[59] She takes Heisenberg's interpreters to task for ignoring the difficulties they face, and points out the 'deep-seated irony' given 'Heisenberg's own reflections on epistemology'.[60]

## Conclusion

The point of all this – and the point that Frayn, in my reading at least, is at pains to make – is that although we can have no firm grounds for making decisions about intentions, we nevertheless have to make those decisions. Frayn argues that he is unambiguous on this question: his Heisenberg is saying, 'we do have to make assessments of intention in judging people's actions'.[61] The 'final core of uncertainty

at the heart of things' does not let us off the hook in terms of making judgements of responsibility or anything else. It means that we cannot *know* whether we are right: that no amount of 'evidence' or historical investigation will reveal how things 'really' are. This does not mean we should ignore the evidence or forgo investigation: we should find out as much as we can. But that will not give us the answer. We can never be certain. We can never be secure. And attempting to seek certainty and security is more than a waste of time: it is dangerous. In seeking to prove ourselves right, we must assert that the other is wrong. In attempting to ensure our own security, we inevitably make the other (and eventually ourselves) less so.

Ironically, the cosmology that made the bomb possible also leads to the questioning of the very notions of security and certainty in whose name the bomb was being produced. However, we are a long way yet from the shift in episteme where 'man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea'.[62] Without a recognition of the interconnectedness and inseparability of contemporary life – and indeed all life forms – and its inevitable vulnerability, there is no way in which the desire for an imaginary wholeness, and the certainty and security that go along with it, can be prevented from driving us to ever more horrific feats of invention.

At the end of the play, Margrethe asks, 'when all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone, what will be left of our beloved world?' There is of course, no answer. Heisenberg replies, 'But in the meanwhile, in this most precious meanwhile, there it is.'[63]

## Notes

1  Parts of this chapter draw on a paper presented for discussion at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, New Orleans, 23–27 March 2002, and published in *Contemporary Politics* 9, no. 4 (September 2003): 361–70.

2  Richard P. Feynman, *Six Easy Pieces: The Fundamentals of Physics Explained*. London: Penguin, 1995: 135–6.

3  Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*. 3rd ed. London: Flamingo, 1992: 149–51.

4  Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007: ix.

5  For an interesting exploration of how much contemporary thinking and culture have 'caught up' or not, see Robert P. Crease and Alfred Scharff Goldhaber, *The Quantum Moment: How Planck, Bohr, Einstein and Heisenberg Taught Us to Love Uncertainty*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2014.

6  Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008; Roger Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind: A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

7  See, for example, James Der Derian, 'From War 2.0 to Quantum War: The Superpositionality of Global Violence.' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 5 (2013): 570–85; and Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

8  See, for example, Adrian Johnston's engagement with Slavoj Žižek's chapter 'Quantum Physics with Lacan' in Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 189–236. London: Verso, 1996, published as Adrian Johnston, 'A Critique of Natural Economy: Quantum Physics with Žižek.' In *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies*, edited by Jamil Khader and Molly Anne Rothenberg, 103–20. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

9  Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics and a New Social Vision*. London: Flamingo, 1993 (the book that Wendt credits with sparking his own interest in the subject).

10  Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998: 96.

11  Frayn's is not the only play to have drawn on quantum physics; another example is Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood*. London: Faber & Faber, 1988. For a discussion of that play see chapter 5 of Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.

12  Barad takes Frayn to task for both his analogical thinking and his interpretation of quantum mechanics; see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 3–25.

13  Finn Aaserud, 'The Need for a Dialogue.' In *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate: Historical Essays and Documents on the 1941 Meeting between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg*, edited by Mattias Dörries, 1–6. Berkeley: Office for the History of Science and Technology, University of California, 2005: 4.

14  An early popular text responsible for much controversy was Robert Jungk's *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*. Translated by James Cleugh. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960. The book that inspired Frayn's play was Thomas Powers's *Heisenberg's*

*War: The Secret History of the German Bomb*. London: Cape, 1993.

15  For the brief summary given here I draw on 'Into the Heart of Darkness', pp. 6–8 of the programme of the Royal National Theatre Production of *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn. Poole Arts Centre, Tuesday 20–Saturday 24 November 2001.

16  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 12, and also 54, 88.

17  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 36.

18  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 76.

19  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 77.

20  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 90.

21  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 111.

22  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 91.

23  Feynman, *Six Easy Pieces*, 117.

24  Henry J. Folse, 'Bohr on Bell.' In *Philosophical Consequences of Quantum Theory: Reflections on Bell's Theorem*, edited by James T. Cushing and Ernan McMullin, 254–71. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989: 255.

25  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 69–70.

26  Niels Bohr, 'The Quantum Postulate and the Recent Development of Atomic Theory.' *Nature*, Supplement, 14 April (1928): 580–90; 581.

27  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 101.

28  According to Bohr, terms in our everyday language make no sense in quantum mechanics. 'Observation' in particular implies a separation of observer and object of observation that is no longer tenable. But we have no other words to use.

29  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 38; 58.

30  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 88–9.

31  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 89.

32  Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1980.

33  Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

34  Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

35  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 30.

36  Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority".' In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell and Michel Rosenfeld, 3–67. New York: Routledge, 1992.

37  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 75.

38  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 81.

39  Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy, 'Getting Slammed: White Depictions of Race Discussions as Arenas of Violence.' *Race Ethnicity and Education* (2012). http://dx.doi.org/DOI:10.1080/13613324.2012.674023.

40  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 93; 80.

41  Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. New York: Cornell University Press, 1985: 162.

42  Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 165. Original emphasis.

43  See, for example, Mike Davis, 'The Flames of New York.' *New Left Review* 12 (November–December 2001): 34–50.

44  Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, i. Of course, these debates arise from a conventional representational reading of the play. In an interesting postdramatic reading of *Copenhagen*, David Barnett counters many of its detractors (David Barnett, 'Reading and Performing Uncertainty: Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* and Postdramatic Theatre.' *Theatre Research International* 30, no. 2 (2005): 139–49).

45  Niels Bohr, *Release of Documents Relating to 1941 Bohr–Heisenberg Meeting*. http://www.nbarchive.dk/collections/bohr-heisenberg. Copenhagen: Niels Bohr Archive, 2002; Anna Maria Hirsch-Heisenberg, ed., *My Dear Li: Correspondence, 1937–1946/Werner Heisenberg, Elisabeth Heisenberg*. Translated by Irene Heisenberg. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016: 168–70. The Heisenberg family has established a website which contains the letter and other documents: http://www.heisenbergfamily.org; the complete collection of letters is in the Heisenberg Archive of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in Berlin (Hirsch-Heisenberg, *My Dear Li*, xv).

46  Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, 108–10.

47  Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, 109.

48  Cathryn Carson, 'Reflections on *Copenhagen*.' In Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 11.

49  Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 101–79.

50  Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, vi.

51  Michael Frayn, '*Copenhagen* Revisited.' *New York Review of Books*, 28 March 2002; Michael Frayn, 'Post-Postscript.' In *Copenhagen*, edited by Robert Butler, 133–49. London: Methuen Drama, 2003.

52  Document 1, reprinted in Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 110, 111.

53  Document 5b, reprinted in Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 127.

54  Document 11c, reprinted in Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 175.

55  Document 11c, reprinted in Dörries, *Michael Frayn's* Copenhagen *in Debate*, 177.

56  The latter appeared in an article by Thomas Powers (Thomas Powers, 'A Letter from Copenhagen.' *New York Review of Books*, 14 August 2003).

57  Hirsch-Heisenberg, *My Dear Li*, xi.

58  Powers, 'A Letter from Copenhagen.'

59  Cathryn Carson, *Heisenberg in the Atomic Age: Science and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2010: 8–9.
60  Carson, *Heisenberg in the Atomic Age*, 9.
61  Frayn, '*Copenhagen* Revisited.'
62  Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock and Routledge, 1970: 387.
63  Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 96.

# 4

# Humanitarianism, humanity, human[1]

*A few people have a bed for the night*
*For a night the wind is kept from them*
*The snow meant for them falls on the roadway*

– Bertolt Brecht[2]

Brecht's poem *A Bed for the Night* tells how a man stands on a street corner in New York soliciting beds for the homeless. Although this 'won't change the world', it does mean 'a few men have a bed for the night'. The reader is called upon not to 'put the book down on reading this', because there is more to be said. What remains to be said is the other side of the coin: that the fact that a few people have a bed for the night won't change the world.

When journalist David Rieff writes on humanitarianism, he begins his book with talk of witness.[3] In a sense he sees himself as a survivor as well as a witness. But as a camp follower of war and violence in far-flung parts of the world over many years, he feels compelled to make some 'moral repayment' for the life he has lived.[4] And as a New Yorker, the events of September 11 brought home to him the degree of moral license involved in visiting other people's atrocities. Rieff is one of many international humanitarians, who, as David Kennedy argues, are 'intensely self-critical, calling themselves repeatedly back to values and forward to their pragmatic implementation'.[5]

The frontispiece of Rieff's book is the poem by Brecht, whose title *A Bed for the Night* is taken for the book as a whole. Rieff argues that, in its utopian focus on a better world, humanitarianism has lost its way. It is no longer independent, but has become a tool of the state – and the militarised state at that. He calls this new

form 'state humanitarianism'. What has been lost, he claims, is what humanitarianism can contribute that nothing else can: a concern for human dignity and direct acts of solidarity and sympathy with those suffering oppression. An increase in talk of humanitarian norms has been accompanied by a sell-out of independent humanitarianism. Rieff argues for an acceptance of the limits to effective action and a recognition that it is the tragedy of the human condition that there is always more that could be done: aid is always 'insufficient to the need'.[6]

In his discussion of the bombing of Afghanistan, Rieff notes that 'it was as if war had become impossible for a modern Western country to wage without describing it to some extent in humanitarian terms'.[7] In the years since he wrote, war has indeed become 'humanitarian war' – the use of military force justified at least in part as humanitarian – waged to aid the suffering or oppressed.[8] Maja Zehfuss calls this 'ethical war'. She argues that, although the idea of 'just war' has a longer history, contemporary ethical war can be traced to the period when 'the West pursued a proactive intervention strategy, formulating and enacting the view that it had the ability and responsibility to help make the world a better place for others'.[9] In an argument that has interesting parallels with Rieff's, although they disagree fundamentally on the question of just war, Zehfuss advocates an acceptance that we cannot be heroes and calls for a response at what she calls 'the limits of ethics'. While Rieff points to what has been lost in humanitarianism's focus on a better world, Zehfuss's work demonstrates that there is more to it than that. She argues that the pursuit of ethics is mistaken: 'such a commitment, counter-intuitively, has led to enhancing the violence' of humanitarian war.[10]

In his book, which was controversial at the time, Rieff insists on locating humanitarianism, not as an unchanging abstract notion, but as a narrative that has had different expressions at different periods. His focus on 'actually existing humanitarianism' and its ambiguities is important, and his work points to some crucial aspects of humanitarian discourse and its functions. In this chapter, I explore his work and several other attempts both to locate the historical origins of humanitarianism and delineate what it does. I examine what might be meant by what I take him to be advocating instead: the return

to a neutral humanitarianism, one outside politics in so far as politics implies the state. The notions on which humanitarianism draws – notions of humanity and the human – must also be located and examined. So often the idea of the human is taken for granted, as if it were unproblematic. In the second part of the chapter I challenge the assumption that we know what is human and what is not, and argue that making these distinctions – drawing these lines – is exactly what 'humanitarianism' seems to want *not* to do, although it nevertheless does it. I argue that even the neutral humanitarianism Rieff advocates falls victim to that problem. Finally, I attempt to address the question of what could be done if we were to give up on the idea of making the world a better place.

### Humanitarianism

It is crucial to locate any discussion of the concept of humanitarianism and its political impact historically, as Rieff does. Humanitarianism is not a timeless truth, but an ideology that has had particular functions and taken different forms at different times in the contemporary world. Rieff takes us through the phases of colonialism and developmentalism, drawing out the way in which their moral and ideological foundations parallel those of the later move to humanitarianism, and he catalogues the shift in forms of humanitarianism from Biafra and Bosnia to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Neta Crawford was one of the first to draw out the connection between the debates surrounding humanitarian intervention and those that took place over colonisation and decolonisation.[11] Many others have said the same since, such that making that connection now almost risks becoming formulaic. Several recent interventions elaborate the intricate histories of humanitarianism further, looking back to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Margaret Abruzzo explores the emergence of humanitarianism in debates over slavery and its abolition in the United States: a slow and complex modification of ideas about cruelty, pain and suffering. Interestingly, the use of these new ideas by the pro-slavery advocates as well as abolitionists shows that 'the language of humanitarianism can serve decidedly unjust ends'.[12] Through a study of a group of well-off white male philanthropists,

Amanda Moniz traces how a 'common imperial humanitarianism' in the service of empire morphed, after American independence, into a transatlantic movement that saw itself as universalist.[13] Her work situates the influence of the anti-slavery movement in a broader context. Caroline Shaw recounts how refugees were seen in the UK in the nineteenth century as 'the ideal liberal subject' and how 'refuge for persecuted foreigners, like the campaign to abolish the slave trade … was thus a foundational act of an increasingly triumphant liberal ideology'. Offering succour to the victims of foreign despotic governments became 'a triumphant exercise of humanitarian conscience'.[14] Peter Stamatov argues that what he calls 'long-distance advocacy' can be traced to the work of religious activists in the course of European imperialism from the sixteenth century onwards.[15]

In Rieff's account, humanitarianism was the only feasible direction for 'the ethically serious European' following the discrediting of both communism and developmentalism after 1989.[16] I have argued that the changes in humanitarian practices and discourse from then onwards can be seen as a succession of radicalising critiques and moderating or reactionary responses.[17] A series of boundary debates – about the relief-development continuum, about the degree of political involvement or 'human rights advocacy' that humanitarians should engage in, about questions of 'co-ordination' of humanitarian and military action – marked stages in the movement from the relatively independent, poorly resourced and fairly marginal humanitarian groups of the Cold War period to a hugely well-resourced state humanitarianism, where the so-called 'non-governmental' sector remains central, but as a subcontractor to state agencies. More recently, the term 'humanitarian war' has come to prominence, as noted above, with military force increasingly justified in humanitarian terms. Indeed, the detailed accounts locating the origins of the humanitarian impulse in abolitionist movements or philanthropy could be seen as an attempt to resuscitate humanitarianism as a practice distinct from war.

Other writers have located humanitarianism historically not only in terms of its different ideological forms but its political functions. Rieff notes that talk of humanitarianism implies failure, but what we should ask is: What functions does that failure perform in the political system? How does the co-option of humanitarianism by the state enable global

governance? The work of David Keen and Mark Duffield is interesting here; both have traced how identifying and acting on 'humanitarian emergencies' reproduces the international system.[18] Keen, as we saw in Chapter 2, argues that famine has beneficiaries as well as victims, and should be seen as a product of the system rather than its failure. Duffield points to the production of a state of 'permanent emergency' that maintains a particular hierarchical political economy and justifies continuing interventions and contemporary wars. For Duffield, security and development have become one and the same.

Ilan Kapoor emphasises the way that humanitarianism, and celebrity humanitarianism in particular, serves to draw a veil over the operations of a capitalist economy and its production of inequality. It 'closes down political contestation and attempts to naturalise the socio-economic status quo'. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek, he demonstrates how it works as an ideological fantasy and acts 'as a cover for the advancement of the neoliberal global order … [panning] away from the grimy foundations' that produce the need for aid in the first place.[19] The audience helps sustain this fantasy and reproduce the global order of inequality.

One of the responses of the humanitarian international to criticism over the years has been to develop sets of criteria formalising the practices of humanitarian relief.[20] Reports from human rights organisations in the 1990s pointed to the way in which food aid and famine relief was used by warring parties in places like Ethiopia and the Sudan – and the human rights abuses in which aid was thereby implicated – even before the activities in the camps in Goma and Bukavu after the Rwandan genocide made the problem plain.[21] These reports led to the attempt, notably by Mary Andersen in her *Do No Harm*, to set out general principles through which humanitarians could avoid becoming implicated in distasteful activities.[22] The setting out of general principles and operational criteria is a predictable reaction of bureaucratised and technocratic agencies to the problems they face. Zehfuss points out that the same attempts to set ground rules can be seen in contemporary Western wars.[23] Such a move is not, however, the answer to dealing with specific political situations on the ground, where ambiguity, lack of information, and contradictory imperatives are the order of the day. Having a set of rules to apply is

one thing, but in applying those rules to a particular case the difficult political decision still remains to be taken.

Humanitarians themselves know this only too well. In a meeting held to discuss one of my papers, one of the people there was a practitioner, a senior staff member in a large international relief organisation. As we talked, I could see that, in his copy of my paper, he had put five lines in the margin next to a quotation from Jacques Derrida. This was what the quotation said:

> That justice exceeds law and calculation, that the unpresentable exceeds the determinable cannot and should not serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles, within an institution or a state or between institutions or states and others. … Not only *must* we … negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable … but we *must* take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves and beyond the already identifiable zones of morality or politics or law, beyond the distinction between national and international, public and private, and so on.[24]

This quotation, and others from the same source, had prompted the editors of the journal to ask for more unpacking and clarification.[25] The humanitarian practitioner clearly understood it immediately. It reflected his everyday predicament, and the battles he had to fight.

### A secret solidarity

As well as not providing the answers, criteria and rules set up to address humanitarianism are in any case based on unexamined assumptions. One of the debates initially centred around establishing principles to help us decide at what point we should intervene to help strangers. What are our responsibilities towards those who are not fellow citizens? Should we take action to help them when to do so would mean intervening in the affairs of another state? How should we do this so as to avoid inadvertently doing harm? These questions take for granted that the people we are concerned to help are what we call 'strangers'.[26] The assumption is that 'we' and 'they' are already distinct, before there is any relationship between us. The only question

to be resolved is whether and how 'we' should help 'them' – and it is not seen as problematic to look for general, ahistorical rules that will provide solutions to those questions.

The state system under which we live is one based on and produced by such distinctions: between domestic and foreign, inside and outside, us and them, here and there.[27] To take these distinctions for granted is already to frame the whole debate in a way that leads inexorably towards a solution supportive of state sovereignty. This is why, far from challenging sovereignty, humanitarianism often reinforces it.[28] And I would suggest that this is the reason too why an increase in talk of normative criteria and the moral basis of humanitarianism is accompanied so closely by the incorporation of the independent humanitarian movement in practices of governance: whether those of individual states or those of the interstate community is largely immaterial.

Does this mean that all forms of humanitarianism will in the end succumb to incorporation by the state? Is it possible to envisage a humanitarianism that restores the concept of neutrality and re-establishes an 'autonomous humanitarian space' distinct from state politics, as Rieff suggests?[29] To address this question we need to examine closely what he has in mind here. The success of the enterprise may well depend on whether it can move away from the assumptions underlying contemporary humanitarianism and develop an approach that does not rely on the constitution of the subjects of its concern in a way that so closely imitates the production of subjects of the state.

The concepts of neutrality and impartiality are often seen as part of an attempt to render humanitarianism apolitical. As a result of the experience of 'actually-existing humanitarianism' since the early 1990s, it is now generally accepted that humanitarian action cannot be separated from politics in the broad sense: it inevitably has political consequences. Rieff does not dispute this, and when he argues for a return to a neutral, independent humanitarianism, I take it he means a humanitarianism that is not closely linked to the politics of the state rather than one that is apolitical. What are the implications of the call for a neutrality of this sort? Is it possible? Can humanitarianism return to its 'core values – solidarity, a fundamental sympathy for victims, and an antipathy for oppressors and exploiters'?[30]

Neutrality can be read in different ways, some more conducive to state humanitarianism and others to the independent humanitarianism Rieff advocates. The concept of neutrality can be seen as drawing on some notion of common humanity – a form of lowest common denominator that all human beings possess and to which humanitarians respond. The human rights discourse relies on a similar concept of a basic humanity to which rights are attached. This approach is problematic, however. As Rieff points out, it emphasises the innocence of victims. Images of children are particularly potent in this discourse because of their guaranteed 'innocence'.[31] Those that humanitarianism helps are 'human beings in the generic sense', in a tale 'devoid of historical context, geographical specificity' and 'any real personalisation'.[32] In other words, they are treated as lives to be saved, lives with no political voice, or what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'.[33]

Bare life is the form of subject produced by, and captured in, the state.[34] Since its inception, the state – a form of what Agamben calls sovereign power – has operated through the distinction of *bare life* – the life of the home, and *politically qualified life* – the life of the public sphere. Bare life is inevitably included in the sovereign sphere by virtue of being excluded from it. The process of setting this form of life outside means that it is nevertheless included in a different sense. Bare life is initially found in exceptional places: zones such as the Nazi concentration camp. Later such zones extend beyond the camp. At this point, the exception becomes the rule and all life becomes bare life. Life under the sway of sovereign power in the contemporary world is no longer politically qualified.

Crucial to the whole process is how bare life is both the object of sovereign power and the subject of democratic attempts to hold that power to account, first through citizens' rights and democratic accountability, then through human rights and humanitarianism. This means humanitarianism and sovereignty share a 'secret solidarity': 'Humanitarian organisations can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight.'[35] Both sovereign power and that which presents itself as opposed to it take bare life as their object or subject.

An example of where this leads is provided by Barbara Hendrie's account of what happened in a refugee camp in the Sudan.[36] The people who had crossed from Ethiopia to Sudan between October 1984 and June 1985 were a highly politicised group. Most were supporters of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and had been living in areas controlled by the Front and taking part in their political reform programmes. The agencies involved in the relief operation that was mounted in the camps were largely unaware of this background: the refugees were seen as usual as victims of drought and war. Families, households and communities were split up on arrival, priority being given to the ordering of camp spaces into a series of zones and grids, with new arrivals simply allocated the next available space on the grid.[37] Later, the refugees began to reorganise themselves according to their district of origin. This caused so much anger from camp administrators concerned at the disruption to their systems that eventually it was carried out secretly and at night. The physical condition of the refugees was by contrast a focus of attention, with data being collected on births and deaths, disease and nutritional status. As far as assistance to refugees was concerned, the main objective of the camp officials was 'to get the death rates down'.[38] Restoring productivity and economic livelihoods was a secondary concern, relegated to 'phase two' of the relief operation.

The Tigrayans themselves did not share this view. Matters came to a head when large numbers of refugees began returning home to begin cultivation in time for the new agricultural season. The camp personnel were alarmed: 'Here we were trying to save lives, trying to provide food and services, and the refugees wanted to leave!'[39] The operation of the relief effort, and particularly the camp, by the international community and its humanitarian agencies produced refugees as 'bare life' – life that could be 'saved' but not life that had a political voice. Victims of famines are expected to be passive recipients of aid and the camp is the location where that passivity is expected to be played out.[40] In this case, the sovereignty of the humanitarian agencies was contested. Hendrie reports a telling exchange that took place between the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the relief organisation of the TPLF over who had the more legitimate claim to speak for the refugees, 'Geneva' or 'Tigray'. To the UNHCR

representative's statement, 'You must tell these refugees to turn back. We are waiting for orders from Geneva', the response was, 'We are waiting for orders from Tigray, not Geneva. Get out of the way – we will take our people home.'[41] The exchange makes very clear what is at stake here.

The notion of humanity risks complicity with state forms – in the same way as the us/them distinction discussed above. Both the state and a humanitarianism based on the concept of a common human essence produce (and depend on) a particular form of racialised subject: one excluded from politics.

## Humanity, human

Primo Levi begins the memoir of his time in Auschwitz-Monowitz with a poem addressed to 'You who live safe in your warm houses'.[42] He enjoins us to

> Consider if this is a man
> Who works in the mud
> Who does not know peace
> Who fights for a scrap of bread
> Who dies because of a yes or a no.[43]

The next stanza begins 'Consider if this is a woman'. He commands us to 'meditate that this came about', to carve the words on our hearts and repeat them to our children – or face his curse.

Levi's account takes us to a world where simple distinctions between human and non-human no longer make sense: a world where people die for no reason except that a guard has decided to kill them; a world where there are no comrades in adversity but an endless 'grey zone' where many are implicated in the evil that is taking place and all are contaminated by it. In the universe of the concentration camp, most prisoners are stripped of all dignity and lose even their will to survive. They become part of 'an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer'.[44] In one sense they have become non-human. They no longer care whether they live or die; their only interest is in food and shelter: 'One hesitates

to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.'[45] However, not everyone in the camp is brought to this state. Some manage to retain their human dignity through various strategies or through luck: they become camp officials, or they steal from fellow inmates, or they obtain privileges that mean they have more to eat or less strenuous work to perform. Survivors are drawn mainly from this group, and they are the ones that bear witness to the camps. The question is: In this context, is it more human to retain one's dignity, one's 'humanity', or to lose it?

Agamben calls this Levi's paradox. The distinction between the human and the non-human is revealed as impossible. The survivors were not 'the best'.[46] On the contrary,

Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the 'grey zones', the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was, nevertheless, a rule. … The worst survived – that is, the fittest; the best all died.[47]

Those who survived, then, those who seemed to have preserved their 'dignity' and their 'humanity', they were the ones who were inhuman. It was 'not decent to remain decent' in Auschwitz; to remain decent was shameful in this context.[48] The drowned, those who lost all their dignity and self-respect, they were the human. In this situation Agamben argues that Levi's paradox can be rewritten: '*The human being is the inhuman; the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human.*'[49]

The narrative of human being as a common essence risks the same exclusionary practices that produce the sovereignty of the nation-state, with its narratives of national identity, and produces the same dehumanised, racialised and depoliticised subjects. Once we start from the idea that there exist first of all separate, atomised individuals, we are compelled to look for commonalties to account for social cohesion. Shared national identity and a shared interest in security account for order within the state. To account for ties that extend beyond state borders, it is logical then to propose a common humanity or human essence. However, if we do not begin with the idea of a separate,

sovereign individual, who has to surrender some of that sovereignty to take part in social practices, but instead look at subjects as produced always already in and through relations with other subjects, as was hinted at in the Lacanian approach described in the previous chapter, the questions change. It is no longer surprising that people feel compelled to respond to those in distress, since their own existence as subjects depends on the dignity of all and the continuance of the social order. What becomes surprising and in need of explanation instead is why sometimes people see others' suffering as none of their business.

David Campbell argues that a more relational view of subjectivity is capable of transforming the way we figure humanitarian action.[50] He suggests that such an approach leads us to a different notion of 'being human', one that 'is not a question of humans having … an essential and universal matter prior to the involvement in relations of power', but a question of their being 'necessarily implicated in and produced by those relations of power'.[51] This means that what is shared is not an essential humanity, but that fact that '*we are all governed and, to that extent, in solidarity*'.[52] When we sympathise with someone caught in a humanitarian crisis, what we feel is 'not a feeling of one citizen towards another, … not a feeling peculiar to a citizen of the world', but rather 'a protest against citizenship, a protest against membership of a political configuration as such'. The bond is not one between fellow members of a political community, national or international, but rather 'a form of political solidarity opposed to the political *qua* a politics tied to the nation-state'.[53]

The suggestion, then, is that the grounds for human solidarity should not be based on some shared, basic, common humanity. Such an approach depersonalises and depoliticises, and operates in symbiosis with the state. The grounds are rather a 'solidarity of the shaken', a coming-together of the governed in the face of the inequities of governance as such. However, it is interesting at this point to return to Levi's depiction of the concentration camp. The relational approach presented by Campbell draws on Michel Foucault to argue that being human involves being implicated in relations of power. However, power relations imply a certain freedom, and a certain resistance, however limited. In a relationship between two people,

if one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power … a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out of the window, or of killing the other person.[54]

In the concentration camp, then, for 'the drowned' there were no relations of power. They had been reduced to a state where they were unable even to commit suicide. They were the non-human.

This returns us to the paradox Levi articulated. We do not want to repeat the totalitarian impulse and deny the humanity of the concentration camp prisoner. The only alternative would seem to be to refuse the distinction between the human and the non-human, even one based as Campbell's is on Foucauldian relations of power. We cannot draw the line.

What might seem like a contradiction at the core of Rieff's argument – his insistence that humanitarianism is historically located and intensely political alongside his argument that humanitarianism needs to retain or revert to its neutrality – can be read as a reiteration of Levi's paradox. He is trapped by the way in which it is impossible to draw the line between the human and the non-human in a way that does not reinforce the politics of sovereignty. Humanitarianism can be analysed as a historical practice – or a principle running through a series of historical practices: colonialism, developmentalism, humanitarianism. But to attempt to isolate an abstract principle of humanitarianism independent of the historical context is already to buy into a particular politics: the politics of drawing lines, that is, the politics that is inherent to the sovereign state.

## So what do we do?

In my writings on famine and aid, I, like many others since, come to the conclusion that it is not at all a given that aid is a good thing. All aid is inevitably political: it benefits some whilst further impoverishing others, and it is increasingly only a disguised form of self-interest. It reinforces the racialised distinctions between donor – white, Western,

civilised, wealthy – and recipient: abject, poor, dependent and, most often, black. And it functions to produce a permanent state of emergency that, ironically, enables the world to continue as it is. But when I teach classes on famine, although people follow and mostly agree with the arguments, in the end they cannot accept the inevitable conclusion. Aid may produce all sorts of problems, but surely, they ask, we can't *not* give aid? We have to try to stop people dying. They may well be right. So, what can we do? How can I answer my students when they insist that we can't do *nothing*?

Brecht's poem with which the chapter began presents a dilemma: the contrast between small actions that offer help in a particular situation, and large-scale attempts to change the world. These two are in tension: attempts to change the world can stop us carrying out more immediate actions to relieve suffering, while on the other hand, alleviating the suffering that is immediately apparent can hide the need to seek to end systems of oppression. Our language ties us in knots here, and we do not know what to do.

As I have argued, whether famine relief solves or exacerbates the famine is a political matter. On the one hand, famine relief must be given; food cannot be withheld from the starving. On the other hand, famine relief must be withheld, since it is the relief aid that is causing the famine (or perpetuating famines). We have here an example of the 'double contradictory imperative'. This leads to what Derrida calls an aporia, and 'ethics, politics and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia'.[55] It is only through the logic of the aporia, where a decision has to be made, that we will arrive at something that can be called 'political'. Without this, what we are doing is following a programme, claiming a priority for knowledge and certainty:

> When a path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a programme … the condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from

which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*.[56]

It is through the experience of this contradiction or aporia, to which no answer can be found, that ethical responsibility becomes possible. By accepting the question of famine relief as undecidable, in the sense that an answer cannot be found through knowledge, the way is opened to the process of ethico-political decision.

Zehfuss extends the argument. She reminds us that 'ethics – like knowledge – is dangerous'.[57] Ethics is seductive, as she demonstrates in *War and the Politics of Ethics*. She argues that we have to give up on seeing ourselves as the potentially heroic saviours of others. Instead, she suggests that we be 'more attentive to the ways in which life is never quite as we wish, never quite adds up and will always expose us to difficult questions':[58]

> From the position of an ethics that is separate from politics, the world always looks in need of improvement because life necessarily falls short of what is imagined to be the good. Ethics therefore works to enable violence rather than to limit and constrain it. … The idea of ethical war creates pressure to continuously improve its techniques, driving … a technology of ethics in which implementing the right protocols or guidelines is impossibly considered to promote the good. The fiction that the harm-inflicting aspect of war can increasingly be overcome is part of the problem in that it seduces us into an impossible expectation of our own harmlessness and indeed heroic ability to help others.[59]

Rieff proposes the direct relief of suffering on a face-to-face basis, by people who have no qualifications for their action other than either a shared experience of being subject to practices of governance or a shared feeling for dignity in the face of the inevitable vulnerability of existence. He comes down, in other words, on the side of offering a bed for the night. The alternative, according to Rieff, is to let ourselves be seduced into thinking that such a form of action can be extended through utopian schemes or elaborated norms and criteria to some overall project of humanitarian action. Such a humanitarianism, based

on a concept of common humanity, would no longer be a solidarity of the oppressed but itself a potential form of oppression.

However, the lesson of the Brecht poem with which Rieff begins his book is perhaps that there is a continuing and valuable tension between giving one person a bed for the night and changing the world. He would appear to be calling on us to recognise both the necessity of attempting to do both and the impossibility of succeeding. It is not an either/or choice but a question of doing both, somehow, like Derrida's double contradictory imperative. Only some form of independent action, whether by individuals working within state institutions or outside them, seems likely to be able to do this. Expert, codified, state-serving action has different imperatives.

One book that stands out among recent work tracing the origins of humanitarianism, and not only for its focus on the Middle East, is Keith David Watenpaugh's *Bread from Stones*.[60] It stands out for me because of the close attention it pays to the experiences of people *doing* humanitarianism. Rather than merely tracing the discourse, or drawing connections between the logics of colonialism and humanitarianism, Watenpaugh draws on accounts found in archives, memoirs and first-person accounts in a range of languages, as well as literary and artistic responses, as he describes in his preface.[61] These accounts are grounded. They demonstrate the complexities and impossibilities that people encounter, and raise questions of responsibility. All of a sudden, we are not dealing with abstractions, but with *people* and what they did. Like Rieff's book, its title is intensely material, practical: bread, like a bed for the night, is a fundamental need. Yet those placed in the position where their survival is at stake in this way are not depoliticised in his account: Watenpaugh reads their accounts as well as those of humanitarians. This is where Watenpaugh's *Bread from Stones* is striking. Like Rieff's *A Bed for the Night*, it does not only locate humanitarianism historically; it locates it in face-to-face interactions and negotiations.

Maybe, then, there is another lesson to be learned from Brecht. Not perhaps that changing the world is in tension with providing a bed for the night, but that all actions are these small actions. We are part of the world – embedded in it, not separate from it – and whatever we do ultimately has an impact. Grand fantasies of changing the world are

irrelevant. We can't help changing the world, all the time. We come back to the idea that slow, small, careful actions are what make and remake the world, as mooted in Chapter 2.[62]

While Chapter 3 examined the question of knowledge, and argued that if we cannot know what the world is like now, we cannot predict the future, the lesson of this chapter turns from knowledge to ethics. The argument has been that searching for answers in the so-called ethical framework of humanitarianism is as problematic as searching for complete knowledge about how things are. We cannot be sure we have done the right thing – indeed, we can never 'do the right thing' since we can never fulfil all our responsibilities at the same time, as Derrida reminds us. And yet, not only do our fellow beings demand that we do something, there is no way we can stand outside the world as neutrals: we are always already doing something, however much we might prefer not to.

Towards the end of his book, published a couple of years after *A Bed for the Night*, Kennedy reflects on his disillusionment with humanitarianism and his scepticism that attempts at renewal through institutions, norms and professionalism will do other than contribute to the problems they are attempting to resolve. He identifies another side to how he is feeling:

> A brief and exciting vertigo can accompany the loss of the experience of *knowing* what to do or what to denounce; along with it, an experience of humanitarianism *in power*. A feeling of responsibility – precisely the heightened responsibility which comes when one must *decide*, and when one can no longer simply denounce. When one must decide without knowing, without having calculated costs and benefits or reached clarity about the requirements of virtue – when one must decide in freedom.[63]

This brief sense of impossibility, of the aporia, soon disappears, however. Despite his vertigo, he cannot resist ending the book with ten 'suggestions'. Although he hastens to assure us that these are not a programme of action, they do seem to set out for the rest of us what we must do. Number ten is 'Decision, at once responsible and uncertain'. He urges his fellow international humanitarians to 'exercise power … with all the ambivalence and ignorance and uncertainty we know as

human. … The darker sides of our nature and our world confronted, embraced, and accepted, rather than denied.'[64]

It seems that, for Kennedy, whatever else we might not know, we still know what it means to be human, in all its 'ambivalence and ignorance and uncertainty'. But this is precisely the problem. The idea of humanitarianism relies, as we have seen, on the impossible distinction between the human and the non-human. But this is not just a question of recognising other humans as human and extending our sympathies beyond the borders of the state. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it,

> Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence. … This circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times … opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods – and 'humans'.[65]

Nancy's framing is refreshingly inclusive; the totality of being includes 'all the dead and all the living, and all beings'.[66] I return to this thought in Chapter 8.

Distinctions between forms of being have operated differently in different periods. At one time 'women' were considered not fully human; they were not politically qualified. At another time, different 'races' were considered primitive or savage, without full capacities as human; colonisation was legitimised on such grounds. Such racialised and gendered distinctions subsist today in perhaps more covert forms. Each of these exclusions were, in their context, considered obvious, unproblematic, and even unchallengeable. Today, the exclusion of non-human animals from the realm of politics is deemed obvious in much the same way. The exclusion of other forms of being is rarely even noticed as such.[67]

Humanitarianism, it seems, functions not only to perpetuate and legitimate distinctions between human beings – rich and poor, deserving and undeserving, donor and recipient – but to establish human being as an independently existing and uniquely valuable form of life.

## Notes

1  This chapter is an extensively revised and much longer version of an embryonic essay that appeared under the same title in *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 2 (2003): 253–8.

2  Bertolt Brecht, 'A Bed for the Night.' In *Bertolt Brecht: Poetry and Prose*, edited by Reinhold Grimm, 46–7. New York: Continuum, 2003.

3  David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002. The book was begun in Sarajevo in 1995.

4  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 4.

5  David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004: 328.

6  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 333.

7  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 240.

8  Maja Zehfuss, 'Contemporary Western War and the Idea of Humanity.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30 (2012): 861–76; Maja Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

9  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, 7.

10  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, 206.

11  Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

12  Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty and the Rise of Humanitarianism*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011: 242.

13  Amanda B. Moniz, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016: 2.

14  Caroline Shaw, *Britannia's Embrace: Modern Humanitarianism and the Imperial Origins of Refugee Relief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 5–6.

15  Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires and Advocacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

16  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 111.

17  Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

18  David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983–1989*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994; Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books, 2001; Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

19  Ilan Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013: 113.

20  'The humanitarian international' is Alex de Waal's term: Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*. Oxford: African Rights and the International African Institute in association with James Currey, 1997.

21  For reports on Ethiopia and Sudan see Alex de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*. An Africa Watch Report. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991; and Ataul Karim et al., *OLS Operation Lifeline Sudan: A Review*. Unpublished independent report with administrative support from the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1996. The difficulties of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide are catalogued in the official report (John Borton, Emery Brusset and Alistair Hallam, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience: Humanitarian Aid and Effects*. London: Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996).

22  Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace–or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999.

23  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*.

24  Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority".' In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell and Michel Rosenfeld, 3–67. New York: Routledge, 1992: 28.

25  The paper in question was Jenny Edkins, 'Legality with a Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Intervention in "Complex Emergencies".' *Millennium* 25, no. 3 (1996): 547–75.

26  So that, as Nicholas Wheeler encapsulates it in the title of his book, we are concerned with 'Saving Strangers' (Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Stamatov, who frames his question in the same way (Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism*).

27  R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Robbie Shilliam's work, discussed in Chapters 9 and 10, on the racialised distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, is relevant here too (Robbie Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018).

28  David Campbell, 'Disaster Politics and the Politics of Disaster: Exploring "Humanitarianism".' In *The Politics of Emergency*, edited by Jenny Edkins. 16–24. Manchester Papers in Politics, 97/1. Manchester: University of Manchester, 1997.

29  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 328.

30  Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 334.

31  We need to think of all 'victims' as innocent. For Rieff, children clearly

are, but to impute 'innocence' to adults caught up in a crisis is to infantilise them in the interests of making 'the moral choices that confront relief workers and their supporters in the West seem far easier than they really are' (Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 25).

32 Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 35.

33 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

34 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.

35 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 133.

36 Barbara Hendrie, 'Knowledge and Power: A Critique of an International Relief Operation.' *Disasters* 21, no. 1 (1997): 57–76.

37 For an extended discussion of this practice see Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

38 NGO staff member, quoted in Hendrie, 'Knowledge and Power', 66.

39 UNHCR staff member, quoted in Hendrie, 'Knowledge and Power', 69.

40 These expectations blind the agencies to the political activities that take place in the camps, as was the case in the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire.

41 Hendrie, 'Knowledge and Power', 71.

42 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man and the Truce*. Translated by Stuart Woolf. London: Abacus, 1979: 17.

43 Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 17.

44 Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 96.

45 Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 96. They were 'the drowned'. Those that escaped this fate Levi designated 'the saved'.

46 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*. London: Abacus, 2013: 62.

47 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 63.

48 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999: 60.

49 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 133. Original emphasis.

50 David Campbell, 'Why Fight: Humanitarianism, Principles and Post-Structuralism.' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (1998): 497–521.

51 Campbell, 'Why Fight', 511–12.

52 Statement by Michel Foucault at a press conference in Geneva under the banner of the Comité International contre le Piraterie, June 1981 (Michel Foucault, 'Confronting Governments: Human Rights.' In *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow. Vol. 3: Power, 474–5. New York: The New Press, 2000). Original emphasis.

53 Derrida, quoted in Campbell, 'Why Fight', 517.

54 Foucault, quoted in Campbell, 'Why Fight', 511.

55 Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*.

Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992: 41.

56  Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41. Original emphasis.
57  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, 207.
58  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, 207.
59  Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics*, 206.
60  Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.
61  Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*, 3.
62  Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. Kapoor tackles the question of what is to be done in the conclusion of his *Celebrity Humanitarianism*. What he proposes is a revolution: a dismantling of capitalism. But he admits that 'there are no guarantees' that this would work, which seems to return us to the ethico-political question of what small, everyday actions we should take (Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*, 127).
63  Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, 342. Original emphasis.
64  Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, 354–5.
65  Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000: 3. Original emphasis.
66  Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 99.
67  Claire Moon's discussion of the human rights of human remains is apposite here (Claire Moon, 'Human Rights, Human Remains: Forensic Humanitarianism and the Human Rights of the Dead.' *International Social Science Journal* 65, no. 215–16 (2016): 49–63).

# 5

# Memory and the future[1]

*Imaginations of socially just futures for humans usually take the idea of single, homogenous, secure historical time for granted.*
                                                    – Dipesh Chakrabarty[2]

Studies of processes and practices of memory explore how people respond to events in the past: how they remember, forget, account for, forgive, memorialise, or commemorate what has happened, and, often, how the way in which they do so produces, reproduces or challenges certain forms of politics or certain specific political structures and systems located in particular places and times. I have already explored aspects of memory in Chapters 2 and 3. In this chapter, I consider time and notions of memory. One segment of the field of memory studies focuses on the memory of violent events – wars, genocides and disappearances, for example – events often described as traumatic. As part of this study, as in memory studies more broadly, we are often led to examine the picture of time or temporality that these practices produce or reproduce.

In my book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, I argued that practices of memory in relation to so-called traumatic events can sometimes, though by no means always, instantiate a form of time that is distinct from linear homogeneous time.[3] I called this form of time *trauma time*. My argument was that since the contemporary form of political order we call the state or sovereign power relies for its existence and its authority on the production of a homogeneous linear or narrative time, trauma time could be seen as an opening for challenge to the state. Whereas state-favoured forms of commemoration favour the insertion of traumatic events into a narrative of heroism and

sacrifice that reinforces the national story, survivors or witnesses of traumatic events often prefer a more open form of memorialisation, one that encircles the trauma and challenges the narrative. Practices of memory in relation to traumatic events could thus potentially provide openings for prising apart the forms of sovereign power we call the state and the ways of life produced by such forms of power.[4]

However, the echo of an ingrained temporal linearity returns to haunt my argument, and, I would suggest, the arguments of other scholars working in this field. Whilst disclaiming any prescriptive aim, and refusing to say how and when openings for a challenge to sovereign power should be seized and by whom, or to specify what alternative forms of authority should or could be put in place, and focusing instead on drawing attention to examples where this has occurred, there is no doubt a desire for change at the root of such scholarly endeavours. In this sense, they remain, on paper at least, trapped within the linearity they attempt to challenge. Are studies of memory and trauma attempts to produce a better world? If so do they rely on the very narrative or continuous time they purport to destabilise?

What I do in this chapter is explore what this means, both for my own argument and for the activity of memory studies and international politics scholarship more generally. I use Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* as a prompt to examine how notions of time are linked to particular ideas of politics and political futures.[5] I explore how these notions of time can be examined in terms of Eric Santner's account of being in the midst of life in his book *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*.[6] If the study of how people remember the past is framed within or by an attempt to change the future, how can that be appropriate given the general challenge to commonly held notions of past, present and future implicit in memory studies, and especially studies of traumatic memory?

## *La Jetée*

Chris Marker's *La Jetée* is a film framed by a traumatic event – an event that stays 'stored there in [the] eyes' of the protagonist of the film, a man whose story we are told but who is not given a name.[7] The

meaning of the traumatic event, which took place at Orly airport, only becomes clear retrospectively: it only ever will have been. At the time, the child who witnesses it does not fully grasp what is going on. It is only at the very end of the film that he realises what it was that he had seen. And yet he retains from the scene one strong image – the image of a woman's face. He returns to this image of the face repeatedly in his thoughts over the succeeding years.

Two memories are fused in the film: the protagonist's memory of a childhood incident and the images of a woman's face, and a collective memory of past destruction. The film is set in the aftermath of a supposed third world war – a nuclear exchange that has left Paris destroyed and its surface inhabited by rats. Humans are confined to a subterranean landscape of tunnels resembling the spaces of the Nazi concentration camps. Released in 1962, the film reflects in its fictional setting reverberations of unease from the collective past of the Second World War a mere seventeen years earlier, the more recent Algerian War, and the anxieties and tensions of the ongoing Cold War.[8] The underground world of prisoners and experiments conjures up the atmosphere of the Nazi camps, and images of the scenes of destruction of Paris reflect the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the fire-bombed cities of Germany. The Cuban missile crisis took place in 1962 and the tensions in the film embody the sense prevalent at that time of nuclear war as an imminent prospect.

The film offers what I read as two distinct fantasies of the future, and two notions of time and politics: first, the notion that the future is something that can be produced or at least influenced by our actions; and second, the idea that the future is in some sense predetermined – and we cannot escape it. The first is, if you like, a linear, progressive notion of time; the second could be seen as a more circular picture. Crucially though, both see time as an external background against which events unfold; time exists independently of us, and the film postulates a science fiction world where we can travel through this external time in the way we might think of travel through geographical space. Both envision an external, pre-existing narrative time, or, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, a 'chronological time, as the time *in which* we are'. Such a time, he argues, 'separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves – spectators who

look at the time that flies without any time left, continually missing themselves'.[9]

However, simultaneously and most interestingly for me, the film offers glimpses of another form of time entirely, one where neither past nor future exist as such and where memory is disconnected and fragmentary. This other form of time is portrayed particularly in the scenes in the middle part of the film, though it can be seen throughout in the photogrammatic techniques used. It reminds me of what Agamben calls 'messianic time, an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time'.[10] The messianic 'is a caesura that divides the division between times and introduces a remnant, a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past'.[11] This is similar to what I am calling trauma time.[12] For Agamben, it is 'the time *that* we ourselves are, and for this reason is the only real time, the only time we have'.[13]

Both the first two notions or fantasies of time propose an escape *from* the ordinary, everyday world of the present: the first imagines that such an escape is possible, *that the future can be changed*, the second that an escape is impossible, or, in other words, *that the future is predetermined*. Both are, as Eric Santner puts it, 'seduced by the prospect of an *exception* to the space of social reality and meaning by the fantasy of an advent, boundary, or outer limit'.[14] The exception, in this case, is situated in another time, a future time, a time outside the everyday life of the present. What Santner suggests we examine instead is the opposite, an escape *into* the midst of everyday life, or, in other words, a giving up of 'the fantasies that keep us in the thrall of some sort of exceptional "beyond"'.[15] Agamben's messianic time and my trauma time can be seen as entailing a traversing of the fantasy such as Santner envisages.[16]

Returning now to *La Jetée*, I will try to show how the idea of an escape *from* the everyday and an escape *into* the everyday might be seen to play out.

## Escape *from* the everyday

In Chris Marker's fictional underworld beneath the contaminated streets of Paris are captives and their guards. Scientists, whispering

disturbingly to each other in German, experiment on the prisoners. The scientists' aim seems to be to find a way out of the post-nuclear war situation – a means of survival – through time travel, and in particular through making contact with the future. They intend to ask the help of a supposed future humanity. Commentators often misread the time travel in the film as an attempt to journey into the past in order to change it and prevent the nuclear war.[17] Salvation, perhaps, is generally expected to be found by changing the past rather than by summoning aid from the future. Certainly, a scenario that seeks to return to the past and change it is widespread in science fiction. But in this case, the film is set in a present that calls on the future for redemption, and the visits to the past it shows happen in order to develop techniques of time travel that will make this appeal to the future possible.

In this first fantasy, the future is seen as something we can change. The everyday world inhabited by the prisoners and guards in the underground tunnels beneath Paris is imagined as a dystopian post-nuclear world, a world dominated by the idea of survival and motivated by the desire to escape this dystopia. What is at work is a fantasy of possibility and control: *'if they were able to conceive or to dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it'*.[18]

The solution proposed is not a direct escape to a different time, but rather that the tools for salvation and a different future are to be found in the future: a future that is supposed to be there, a future where humanity has survived. The answer to problems in the present is to be found in that future. By travelling to the future and bringing back food, medicine and sources of energy, humanity will be saved. The assumption or presupposition is that if the future exists then people obviously found a way to escape their current predicament. It would then be the inevitable duty of these future people to help their forebears – and thus reconfirm their own existence. And they do: they give the visitor from their past a source of energy strong enough to power the regeneration of industry in his present.

This is a fantasy of control and possibility, of progress towards a better future by developing a means of travelling through time. The second fantasy is one of impossibility and determinism. It was the protagonist of the film who was the subject of the experiment in time

travel. He had been chosen because of the strong image of the woman's face that he carried in his memory from the event on the observation pier at Orly airport in the time before the destruction. After sending him on several journeys into the past, a technique to project him into the future was perfected. His visit to the future was successful, and his usefulness to the scientists ended. He awaited his fate. The people of the future offered him the possibility of joining them, but, instead, he chose to travel back to that day at Orly, in search of the woman who might be waiting for him. Once there he finally realised what it was he had witnessed the first time: the moment of his own death. Escape was not possible: *'there was no way to escape Time'*.[19]

In this second fantasy of the future, time becomes a circle, coming back to a beginning that always already entailed a particular end. It points to the impossibility of controlling the future, and a determinism or a fatalism that reflects back on the attempts of the scientists at time travel: if the future is predetermined, then attempts to produce a better future are part of that rather than a vital intervention without which a different future would appear.

Both of these fantasies, and indeed the whole conceit of the film as a science fiction narrative, rely on the notion of an external background time of past, present and future, which is there as an outside, beyond our reach or control, though we may or may not be able to move backwards and forwards within it. It may be linear, stretching into the future and the past, or it may be circular, turning back on itself like a Mobius strip, but it is external to us. In the first fantasy, the future exists outside the world, as 'some sort of a "beyond" of the space of meaning that would nonetheless be a possible object of meaningful experience'.[20] The second enacts the fantasy of witnessing one's own death, or in other words of 'occupying the place of an impossible gaze at the outer limits of one's being-in-the-world'.[21] Most studies of memory politics also rely on this notion of an external universal time.

### Escape *into* the everyday

But the film is more than the expected science fiction narrative, and it does more than reveal or perhaps pander to our fantasies of time and the future. At the centre of the film, framed within the experiments

with time travel, is a simple love story. Rather than just providing a romantic interest, this story presents an alternative to the external flow of time: it proposes a time that is disjointed, a time of encounter, of lack or excess, and of loss.

In this part of the film, we see a series of everyday settings in the world before the war: '*a dateless world*': a missed meeting in a department store, where the man catches a glimpse for the first time of the woman whose face he recalls so clearly, but is distracted by the plethora of goods on display and loses her again; another encounter where they are close and he speaks to her; a stroll in a park, surrounded by other people, and children; they sit in the sun, inspect their surroundings; he watches her sleeping; a final encounter in a museum of natural history, '*filled with timeless animals*', where they are surrounded by specimens of what seems like every form of natural life, but stuffed, behind glass, or classified, in cabinets, and they talk, laugh, and move among the exhibits almost as if they are exhibits themselves.[22]

On each occasion, there is a certain hospitality to the other, an openness: '*She welcomes him in a simple way.*'[23] The notion of simple acceptance recalls Jacques Derrida's hospitality: 'Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.'[24] There is an acceptance of what happens, without a demand for reason or justification. Though the man is unsure whether he is dreaming or inventing what is happening, he goes along with it. As for the woman, she doesn't know when or whether the man will appear, but she accepts him as he is: '*She calls him her ghost.*'[25] When he tells her the impossible story of where he comes from, she does not mock or question: '*she listens; she doesn't laugh*'.[26]

During these encounters we have a suggestion that the lived experience of time is nothing like an external universal time: '*They are without memories, without plans. Time builds itself painlessly around them. Their only landmarks are the flavor of the moment they are living and the markings on the walls.*'[27] There are no plans for the future, and there is no memory of the past. As in Agamben's messianic

time, the moment of encounter is the only time they have, and a time they seize and hold. It is an escape *into* the everyday, into what Santner calls 'the midst of life', and involves letting go of the fantasy of an outside, an external time.[28] It means traversing both the fantasy of a better future *and* the fantasy of the impossibility of escape. Being in the midst of life also involves 'a mode of tarrying with' an 'unassumable excess' rather than 'defending against it'.[29]

In this central part of the story the face emphasises the singularity of the moment and the form of the encounter. The woman has a face: indeed, as we saw, it was the image of her face, held in the man's memory, that was used to engineer these encounters in time. The man's face appears when he is with the woman, but is hidden during the scenes in the underground passages. White plastic foam masks cover his eyes as the scientists experiment on him. The scientists wear goggles. The faces of the future are disembodied. In the only moment where the film slips from a montage of still photographs to a moving image, it is the woman's face that we are looking at. She opens her eyes and looks at the camera, or, as Janet Harbord puts it, 'the woman looks at us and we mimic her'.[30] We look into her eyes.

These parts of the story can be read as an interruption of a linear or circular notion of external pre-existing time, but so can the photogrammatic techniques of the film as a whole.[31] It is not just the uncanny moment where the woman opens her eyes and looks at us – when one watches the film one cannot be sure that this moment has actually happened – but rather the way in which the film is constructed from still photographs woven together but 'separated by straight cuts, fades and dissolves of varying duration' and operating through well-worn cinematic traditions of 'establishing shots, eyeline matches, shot-countershot, close-ups and so forth'.[32] This technique almost lulls us into reading movement into the still images as if we were watching a moving picture, not a series of stills. It is eerie, too – as if there were breath and life in the characters, but not quite.

Jenny Chamarette argues that in *La Jetée*, 'Marker's move away from illusional cinematic movement and continuity … makes obvious the impossibility of a pure representation of time.' In traditional cinema, an illusion of the familiar flow of time is produced. But in *La Jetée*, 'both subject-matter and medium invoke an exploration of a

subject-in-time … through a narrational and image-based temporality that is deliberately striated, separated, made unreal and cut into moments'.[33] Although Chamarette reads this exploration as ultimately pessimistic, showing the entrapment of the protagonist within the circularity that leads inevitably to his death, it can be read differently. Despite the strong linearity of the superimposed science fiction narrative, the film, through its photogrammatic structure, gestures at the impossibility of an external linear narrative temporality, or, rather at the gap between such a notion of time and the time of the everyday.[34]

The science fiction narrative itself, which seems at first so plausible, given its genre, is riddled with contradictions and impossibilities. The efforts of the scientists, directed at obtaining resources to ensure a better future, one in which humanity survives, rely on the presumption that humanity has already survived: what they are trying to do wouldn't make sense unless the result they were striving to produce had already happened. What seems to be predicated on the idea that the future can be changed turns out to be reliant on the notion that the future is predetermined. The fantasy is doubled-edged: the future is both open to change and predetermined at the same time.

The moment of death that closes the film is also in a sense double-edged. It seems a sign of entrapment, of the impossibility of escape. Indeed the voice-over tells us the man '*understood that there was no way to escape time, and that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child … was the moment of his own death*'.[35] This seems to mean that his attempt to travel back in time, to encounter the woman again and remain there on this occasion, is doomed to fail. His going back to the moment at Orly turns out not to be a choice but to already have been necessary to complete the first moment. The fantasy of possibility turns out to entail an impossible doubling once more: he realized '*that the child he had been was due to be there too, watching the planes*'.[36] He can only go back by being in two places, and two times, at once: fantasies of a secure time and place fall apart.

Slavoj Žižek's writing on Lacan's phrase 'a letter always arrives at its destination' is perhaps helpful here.[37] Žižek points out that the idea that a letter always reaches its destination is a function of a retroactive reading of events, where contingency is read as necessity. In a sense what this is saying is that a letter only becomes

what it is retrospectively. There is, in other words, no external linear background time in which the letter could continually exist, where we could track it step by step on its way to its destination, if you like. There can be no essence; nothing can 'be' as such, without a concept of continuous, linear time. Towards the end of his discussion, Žižek remarks: 'the only letter that nobody can evade, that sooner or later reaches us, i.e., the letter which has each of us as its infallible addressee, is death'. This is, inevitably, an encounter with the traumatic real, lying in wait, as it were, 'at the end of the imaginary as well as the symbolic itinerary'.[38]

However, this traumatic real 'is not only death but also life … the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order'.[39] Maurice Blanchot's short reflections entitled *The Instant of My Death* recount his memory of the moment where he faced death by firing squad, and his feeling in that instant 'of compassion with suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal'.[40] Later, he tells us, 'all that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance'.[41] For Santner it is precisely our defences against this moment always in abeyance – translated into our faith in the social or symbolic order, its abstraction from life and its fantasy that we call social reality – a reality that for Santner is specifically a biopolitical order – that 'keeps us from opening to the midst of life' and lead us to an escape *from* the everyday rather than an escape *into* the everyday.[42]


## Conclusion

What might all this mean for memory scholars, or, indeed, scholars more broadly? Are studies of politics, memory and trauma attempts to produce a better world? If so, do they rely on the very narrative or continuous time they purport to destabilise?

In my own work on memory, trauma and politics I have examined 'the struggle that takes place between survivors of trauma and the sovereign powers that they confront'. I examined instances 'where the state normalised and disciplined trauma to reinstate linear narratives' and where 'those attempts have been subverted'.[43] I pointed out that in any case, the traumatic excess escapes capture. However, lurking

behind my argument is a notion that resistance to state-imposed forms of memory (or forgetting) might lead to a better world. I talk, for example, of what we should do: 'if we are to resist attempts to "gentrify" or depoliticise' trauma we have to recall that what we call social reality is a fantasy, and one we must attempt to traverse.[44] We need to 'retrieve ... the properly political domain, ... the sphere of trauma time'.[45] Embedded in these injunctions is the idea of a future time, one that we can make different from the present, and hence the fantasy of a homogeneous, external time against which our actions take place resurfaces.

If we appear at first glance to risk reinforcing the fantasy of an escape *from* the everyday, what might an escape *into* the everyday mean for scholarly enquiry? What does it mean to remain in the midst of life?

To address this question somewhat obliquely, I shall return briefly to Santner's story of Franz Rosenzweig.[46] In his writings, Rosenzweig 'explicitly distinguishes his understanding of being-in-the-midst-of-life from what he takes to be the concept of the human subject, its life, and world found in philosophy'.[47] Rosenzweig saw the academic life as a 'defence against the exigencies of being in the midst of life', driven by questions imposed from outside rather than arising from life.[48] He withdrew from academic work, refusing any longer to answer to a discipline-driven scientific curiosity, but rather attending only to questions that arose when he was inquired of by men rather than scholars: 'there is a man in each scholar, a man who enquires and stands in need of answers'.[49]

Scientific curiosity, which Rosenzweig identifies with metaphysical thinking, is seen as a defence against opening to the midst of life. The 'lure of metaphysical thinking' isn't just a danger to philosophers, but to everyone; it doesn't 'befall everyday life from the outside; everyday life itself is congenitally susceptible to this mode of thinking which is ... a kind of withdrawal from, a kind of fantasmatic defence against, our being in the midst or flow of life'.[50] In modernity, it is the norm. More than that, Rosenzweig sees it as a defence against death: 'If living means dying, [man] prefers not to live. He chooses death in life. He escapes from the inevitability of death into the paralysis of artificial death.'[51]

Being in the midst of life, as we have seen, entails 'a certain *suspension* of fantasy' and of metaphysics.[52] It involves 'a mode of tarrying with [an] unassumable excess', a trauma.[53] In some ways, scholars of memory are perhaps among those best placed to operate from the midst of life. Despite the way that culturally prevalent notions of memory frame it in terms of a linear movement from past to present to future, we tend to be concerned with particular practices of memory, firmly located in particular presents. In a sense our interest in what we call traumatic events prompts us to do this: such events bleed across time and generations, do not take place once and for all but often only retrospectively or in repetition, and defy location, narration and description. Memory scholars are well placed to heed Chris Marker's warning about the type of politics – or type of social fantasy – that might bring a dystopian future about: a politics that seeks answers in some outside – something other than the everyday, the midst of life.

Marker's film points at one and the same time to the impossibility and yet the importance of inhabiting another time: not a past or a future, but another form of time altogether. It shows how powerful and embedded notions of external time are and how strong a part they play in social fantasy, or at least in a biopolitical social fantasy. It may be possible to *live* another time, to *inhabit* it, but not to tell of it. As I have noted before, 'trauma time cannot be described in the language we have without recourse to notions of linearity'.[54] Perhaps Marker's film embodies 'another way of telling'. As John Berger argues in his book of this name, 'the photograph cuts across time and discloses a cross-section of the event or events which were developing at that instant'. It 'tends to make meaning ambiguous', whilst simultaneously allowing us 'to see the interconnectedness and related coexistence of events'. Some photographs can convey what is 'too extensive and too interwoven to enumerate very satisfactorily in words'.[55] Such photographs, which Berger calls exceptional, inhabit trauma time, messianic time, the time of the now, the time of the everyday, and show it to us in a way language generally cannot. Marker's film incorporates such photographs and enhances their ambiguity and interconnectedness through the way they are woven into a linear narrative, which they destabilise rather than illustrate.

As memory scholars, we often turn to images or photographs, or alternatively to fictional forms, in an attempt to convey what we mean. Maybe our arguments cannot be contained in familiar academic prose but call for some attempt at escape from those constraints – an escape *into* the everyday, perhaps. And as scholars more generally, perhaps what we are being called to do here is similar to the everyday close listening and slow rebuilding examined in Chapter 2, as opposed to the busy-ness Santner identifies in his more recent work.[56] Is the everyday what Frayn, in his play *Copenhagen*, has Heisenberg term 'this most precious meanwhile', where we forgo ideas of metaphysical (or any other) certainty?[57] Is it perhaps, to think back to the previous chapter, that being in '*the midst of life*' is, as Santner puts it, what happens 'when we truly inhabit the proximity to our neighbour, assume responsibility for the claims his or her singular and uncanny presence makes on us not only in extreme circumstances' – like the humanitarian emergencies we discussed in that chapter – 'but every day'.[58] The question that remains, of course, and one both Rosenzweig and Santner ask, is whether such a comportment, such a habitation, is compatible with, or is allowed in the academic world. If it is not permitted, or not possible, what then?

## Notes

1  An early version of this chapter was presented at the workshop on 'Memory, trauma and change in world politics' held in Montreal on 15 March 2011. I would like to thank Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte for inviting me to speak at the workshop, Maja Zehfuss for her discussant remarks on the paper, and participants for their comments and questions. The workshop and the research for this paper were supported by an International Studies Association Venture Workshop award. The paper was also discussed at a meeting of the Performance and Politics Research Group at Aberystwyth University on 15 February 2011, and I would like to thank colleagues in that group for their contributions.

2  Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008: 15.

3  Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

4  As discussed in Chapter 4, sovereign power, as articulated by Giorgio Agamben, relies on distinctions, particularly that between bare life and

politically qualified life (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

5    *La Jetée*. Directed by Chris Marker, Argos Films, 1962.

6    Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. See also Eric L. Santner, 'Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor.' In *The Neighbor: Three Enquiries in Political Theology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, 76–133. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006; and his own study of memory and film, Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.

7    The phrase is Michael Herr's, from his book *Dispatches*; quoted in Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996: 10.

8    Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005: 88.

9    Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Translated by Patricia Dailey. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005: 68. Original emphasis.

10    Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 68.

11    Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 74.

12    I make this argument more fully in Jenny Edkins, 'Time, Personhood, Politics.' In *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone, 127–40. London: Routledge, 2013.

13    Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 68. Original emphasis.

14    Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 30. Original emphasis.

15    Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 31.

16    The phrase 'traversing the fantasy' reflects a Lacanian approach such as that adopted by Slavoj Žižek; see for example Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. I discussed this approach in Chapter 3.

17    For example, Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006: 94; Kai Lindroos, *Now-Time – Image-Space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of Art and History*. Jyvaskyla: SoPhi, University of Jyvaskyla, 1998: 219.

18    Chris Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman*. New York: Zone Books, 1992. This volume contains all the still images which comprise the film, with the text of the voiceover script in English and French. There are no page numbers. Quotations from this volume in the rest of the chapter are shown in italics.

19  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*
20  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 13–14.
21  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 14.
22  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*
23  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*
24  Derrida, *On Hospitality*, 77, cited in Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010: 219. Original emphasis.
25  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.* Again, I am reminded of Derrida, this time of his hauntology or spectrality. See, for example, his discussion of Nietzsche's phantom friends in Jacques Derrida, 'The Politics of Friendship.' *Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 11 (1988): 632–44: 287–8.
26  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*
27  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.* The markings on the walls are mysterious scribbles, not quite graffiti, that appear in only one of the stills but are referred to a couple of times in the voice-over.
28  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 11–24.
29  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 22.
30  Janet Harbord, *Chris Marker: La Jetée*. London: Afterall Books, 2009: 24.
31  Jenny Chamarette, 'A Short Film About Time: Dynamism and Stillness in Chris Marker's "La Jetée".' In *Rhythms: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Lindley and Laura McMahon, 217–35. Berne: Peter Lang, 2008.
32  Lupton, *Chris Marker*, 91.
33  Chamarette, 'A Short Film About Time', 221.
34  It would be interesting to examine this in relation to another montage, this time not one of still photographs but of film excerpts, in Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010): 'The Clock draws attention to time as a multifaceted protagonist of cinematic narrative. With virtuosic skill, the artist has excerpted each of these moments from their original contexts and edited them together to form a 24-hour montage, which unfolds in real time. While constructed from a dizzying variety of periods, contexts and film genres whose storylines seem to have shattered in a multitude of narrative shards, The Clock uncannily proceeds at a unified pace as if re-ordered by the latent narrative of time itself. Because it is synchronized with the local time of the exhibition space, the work conflates cinematic and actual time, revealing each passing minute as a repository of alternately suspenseful, tragic or romantic narrative possibilities.' Press release, Paula Cooper Gallery, https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/christian-marclay-the-clock/press-release. Thanks to Mike Pearson for drawing my attention to this piece.
35  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*
36  Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman.*

37  Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. London: Routledge, 1992: 1–28. See also Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "the Purloined Letter".' *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 38–72.

38  Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 21.

39  Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 22.

40  Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000: 5. I am grateful to Karoline Gritzner for drawing my attention to the relevance of Blanchot here. Jacques Derrida's reflections on Blanchot's 'memoir' are contained in the same volume (Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

41  Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, 11.

42  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 45.

43  Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 230.

44  Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 14.

45  Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 229.

46  Rosenzweig's major work is *The Star of Redemption*. Translated by William W. Hallo. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.

47  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 14.

48  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 15.

49  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 18. Santner did not follow this path of leaving academia; he moved from memory studies based on looking at film, through theoretical work and back to work on fiction, examining the work of German novelist W.G. Sebald.

50  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 21.

51  Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man and God*. Translated by Nahum Glatzer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999: 102. Cited in Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 22.

52  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 10.

53  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 22.

54  Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 16.

55  John Berger and Jean Mohr. *Another Way of Telling*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995: 120. The sketches Berger uses to explain what forms of temporality he is thinking of remind one of Agamben's attempts to illustrate messianic time (Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 63–5).

56  Eric L. Santner, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy (the Berkeley Tanner Lectures)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

57  Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998: 96.

58  Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 7.

# 6

# Loss of a loss[1]

*Someone, broom in hand,*
*still remembers how it was.*
*Someone else listens, nodding*
*his unshattered head.*

*But others are bound to be bustling nearby*
*who'll find all that*
*a little boring*

– Wisława Szymborska[2]

Emerging from Courtland Street subway provides the first shock. The landscape is entirely unfamiliar. In front of me a busy construction site with tall buildings on all sides. A huge steel semi-circle like some giant fairground ride heaves into the air, topped by giant cranes. No sign of Ground Zero. No neat steel fences with the names. Crowds of people though, mostly walking in the opposite direction. Slowly I take my bearings. Here is St Paul's churchyard. Railings bare: they used to be festooned with scarves, T-shirts, banners, mementoes. People taking photographs: that is the same. Slowly, slowly, the place begins to resolve itself into something I can grasp.

The churchyard is still there. The trees that had been hung with detritus spewed out as the buildings came down are still there, pristine now, coming into bud this spring. Where am I standing? Is it where the viewing platform had been in 2002? Where people had queued quietly to climb up for their two minutes overlooking the pit? I check the buildings to the right. Yes, that is it. The plywood platforms, endorsed by a visitor called Mariette with the words 'We all lost you

1    Construction site, Ground Zero, May 2014

all, and mourn together. We are *not* sightseers' stood right here. I take some photographs. Pause. Think.

Which way to go? Follow the crowds? There are notices saying 'Entry to 9/11 Memorial this way'. I turn around. Hoardings surrounding the construction site opposite seem to be showing what it will look like: 'Shopping and Dining at the World Trade Center', they announce. OK. So this is going to be the best shopping mall in the world. A shopping mall to beat all shopping malls. How great the US is. I am in need of a pause. The Starbucks on the corner is still there – I enter, order and sit. People around occupied with their devices. It is quiet.

After a while I resume. Walk towards Greenwich Street, where the entrance to the memorial is, so the signs tell me. People all around, crowds in the warm sunshine, enjoying themselves, working out where to go, what to do next – like me. Police on every corner: directing pedestrians, joking with me about coaches parked across zebra crossings. I decide to give up on Greenwich Street for the time being and head to the right down a random street. Signs tell me I won't be able to visit the memorial without a pre-booked pass anyway. I need to go to memorial.org to do that.

The street I've taken runs down the back of a fire station, down the back of the Tribute Center I visited five years ago. I take a right past a memorial wall. I find myself at a corner I know well. This street used to form the outer edge of the Ground Zero that was. Not many people here. A tall new building opposite. And a police officer, large, burly, imposing, watching me. From here I can see the memorial. Or at least, I see the rows of the swamp white oaks that I've read about somewhere. I take some photographs. I move across the road to take some more. The officer tells me I can't stand in the road. I ask if it's okay if I cross. 'I need to stand on the sidewalk?' I say. 'Yes.' I take more photographs. I think I may have included the officer, but I'm not sure: I find I'm ambivalent about that. I'd like to move closer, but that means moving off the pavement and across another road. That's not allowed, the officer indicates. He is sympathetic. He tells me where the entrance to the memorial is and asks if I am going to visit it. I tell him I might come back tomorrow and do that. I tell him I'm trying to connect what's here now with what was here before. Again, he seems sympathetic.

Suddenly, for some reason, I am overwhelmed and I turn away. I am overcome with grief: grief for what this place has become, perhaps.



2    Corner overlooking the site, Ground Zero, May 2014

In 2003 I went to town hall meetings where they were debating what should be done with the site. These were huge meetings, open to all comers, with dignitaries on the platform and an emotional audience. Some wanted to build the towers back bigger – just to show them. Others, equally passionate but less loud, argued for leaving an empty space, not reconstructing: there was no demand for office space in the area. Some said, if I remember rightly, the WTC had been loss-making, part empty even. What was needed was community space.

And there was this enormous sense of community in Manhattan after 9/11 – the vigils in the parks, the temporary memorials, the applause for rescue workers as they cleared the site, the tea and support at St Paul's, the visitors an enveloping cordon around the destruction and loss. None of that is there now. The visitors now *are* sightseers, for sure. We weren't back in 2002.

The debates back then were a little like those around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – a moment of openness, a moment of unknowing, when the hole left when certainties disappear was visible and a different way seemed a real possibility. Had I been able to, I would have visited Berlin then. That moment was soon closed down, as what we now call neo-liberalism moved into the vacuum on a wave of US triumphalism.

I don't return to the hotel. I continue walking, no crowds now, towards Battery Park. In 2002, this was the place where *The Sphere* from the WTC Plaza was placed. It has probably been moved now. More signs of new construction, with the familiar 'post no bills' stencils, although we are well away from the area that was destroyed on 9/11. I turn again down to the right, and then right again, drawn in somehow. Other buildings, smaller ones, boarded up and derelict. At the end of the street I see the crowds again. And the sign, just legible, 'Entrance. 9/11 Memorial.' I decide to go take a look, and take some photographs.

The crowds are milling around, gathering, forming into groups. There are plenty of notices here – information about opening hours, what is not permitted, warning that there are no public restrooms on site – and one in a different format, black on white, telling us that this is a memorial site and demanding our respect. I'd read and been told by a friend about the security measures and the long walk from

3   Entrance, 9/11 Memorial, May 2014

the entrance to the site itself. I could see a small tent, the security tent perhaps.

I decided I might ask whether I could get in without a pass, but then I noticed there were two lanes: one for those with a pass, to the right, one for those without, to the left. And most people were making their way to the left. I joined them. A fairly fast moving lane of people being herded up and down between the standard black tapes, adjusted occasionally by staff to regulate the flow. It became clear as we got closer that the tent I'd spotted wasn't security, but a collection point for donations: five dollars or ten dollars, or 'give what you can'. A family in front of me discussed softly how much they would give: 'If there's a choice, we'll choose nothing.' By the time we got there, the demand of the transparent donation boxes, with a slot at the top to post your bills, guarded by smiling staff we had to pass one by one, was inexorable. We all paid up, even those who'd said they were intending to donate zero. I consider calculating how much they must be making from the steady stream, but don't. I was told later that without Federal funding finance is a real problem.

Beyond this point, progress slows as the pre-ticketed join the rest of us to weave around corners and past construction sites, through a

building where we are instructed to prepare for airport-like security – coats and jackets off, coins out of pockets, devices in the tray. Once through this last hurdle, our tickets scanned and deleted, things speed up. Tickets out again to pass a final test – very necessary, as there is little to stop the unprocessed joining us, bypassing security as we round the final corner – and we are here.

Trees. Rectangular beds and paths that regiment. One tree resplendent in full bloom. I pause to take it all in. People already there, sitting or strolling. Warm, sheltered place in full sun. A park like any other, perhaps. Some groups standing around seem to be reluctant visitors – impatient to leave, more interested in their own concerns, bored. Groups of police officers.

All together it seems, we head to the west side of the South Pool. It is crowded as people lean over to see the water falling. The sound the water makes fills our ears. I recall hearing somewhere that this is the most impressive thing – more than the sight, the sound overwhelms. The sound of the buildings falling? I wonder what sound that made. This sound certainly produces the silence of white noise that shuts out the sound of the traffic. I take pictures of the sunshine on the water



4   Corner of South Pool, 9/11 Memorial, May 2014
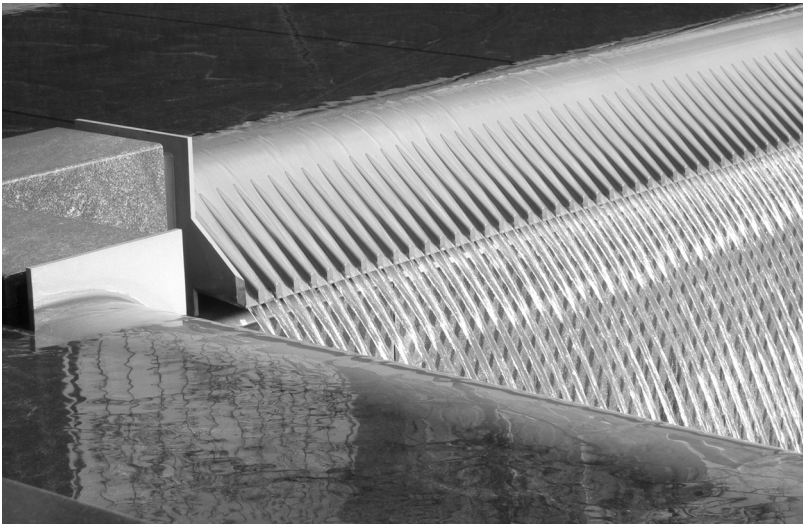
as it is guided with accuracy into thin round streams by channels that funnel it from the edges over the sides into the first pool, turbulent. And from there into the central pit. It is impressive in its scale and precision. The care of designer, architect and builder is apparent. The angles are exact, the water controlled: a gigantic spectacle meticulously crafted in every detail. Like the spectacle it commemorates, perhaps.

The crowds are thinner on the other sides of the pool. The names. A lot of names. This was a lot of people who died that day. Flight 93. The Pentagon. First Responders. Names under each of these. Names. Jennifer L. Howley and her unborn child. I look for panel 66. This is the panel where, searching online, I had found several names with no indication of employer or place of residence: undocumented workers, perhaps. And one name has been added: Jerry J. Borg. When the light catches the panel it reveals how this last name has its own indentation, breaking the smoothness of the surface.

In a wall to the side of the South Pool is what looks like a row of ATMs. Turns out these are terminals giving access to the database of names. People search, or listen to recorded testimonies of relatives. I'd read before that visitors were using smart phone apps to do this – and I did see a few.



5   Names on the 9/11 Memorial, May 2014

I move across to the North Pool: it is cold, shaded, and only two sides are accessible. The museum is not open yet, but through the glass one can glimpse vast escalators moving underground, and iconic steel girders, rust brown, ribs of the old towers, preserved for eternity.

I notice two large ugly grey buildings at the west side of the site, and I ask one of the security people what they are for. Maintenance. Of course. I ask how long it will be before the site is complete and the surrounding construction finished. The current date is 2019, five years from now. A long time. Too long, the person labelled security remarks. I agree. There seem to be a lot of large buildings going up all around, I say. He points out a tall grey building with a round water cylinder on top of it – 'A new Hilton, to accommodate all the people coming here', he says. And a new transportation hub to replace the one that was here before, but transformed: a huge shopping complex where there had just been 'a Hudson's and one or two other shops' under the old Trade Center. 'A huge new tourist attraction', I remark. He doesn't demur.

I am curious what will happen to all the fences and security when the site is finished. The security will remain, he tells me, but the



6    Photographing visitors attempting to photograph the inside of the 9/11 Museum, May 2014

fences will go. People will be able to just walk onto the Plaza. The airport-style checks will move to the Museum. I'm not sure I shall be back in 2019 to check.

On the way out we are directed past the obligatory souvenir store – the usual paraphernalia of mugs, fridge magnets, T-shirts emblazoned with slogans: 'In Darkness We Shine Brightest'; 'Honor. Remember. Reunite'. The collection of books is interesting. Almost all reflect a narrative of rebuilding, overcoming, stealing survival from the jaws of death, national pride. Nothing left now of memory. No sense of the disruption to national invincibility and invulnerability that the events of September 11 seemed to represent, to some at least. No evidence of the traumatic shock, or the recognition that others suffer like this daily. No recognition of the direction in US foreign policy that a particular narrative legitimated. No sense remaining that it could have been otherwise. We/they have rebuilt, but higher.

We have no memorial, no space to remember, nothing but a major new tourist attraction and the new infrastructure to make money from it: shops, hotels, products, apps. No sacred space, no space for the sacred, for the story, for the ambiguity, for the loss. I return to my hotel angry, disillusioned, upset. I shall not go again. Co-opted once into a narrative as victims – heroes – of wars that were yet to take place and would take hundreds of thousands of other ordinary lives in other places, the names of those lost on 9/11 – and their narratives – are now permanently engraved in a site of global tourism yards from the financial centre of Wall Street. Forgotten indeed.

But I did go back once more, the day I was leaving New York. After my first visit, at the start of the week, I was impelled to write an account, to set down on paper what had happened and how I felt, so that I would not forget. Over lunch the Tuesday after, I filled pages and pages of a lined paper pad with script. On the Saturday evening, fearful of losing the handwritten pages, I typed it up. On Sunday morning, I was back at the site.

It was not warm, like the first visit, but cold and windy. I went, so I told myself, to check some details that I'd missed the first time. I was less disoriented by then. Courtland Street subway was closed, so I arrived via Chambers Street and walked up Vesey to the Memorial

Preview Site on the corner with Church Street – where people are directed to go to purchase their visitor passes. It was early in the morning, so not crowded. I looked inside briefly, then walked along Church and down Liberty to the corner with Greenfield Street that overlooks the memorial plaza: the place I had stood on my first visit earlier in the week, disorientated and disturbed as I had been then. I could see people already circulating around the site, looking over the edge of the pools, moving slowly around them.

As I stood contemplating, one of the security staff approached and asked whether I knew where I was going. 'Yes. I've been to the memorial site already. I just wanted to take another look from here.' 'So you know where you are.' 'Yes.' He started talking, pointing out the various new Trade Center buildings – some built, some yet to be constructed, the transportation hub, the state-of-the-art vehicle security screening facility, the museum – and telling me how Freedom Tower had been renamed WTC1. He told me of the conflict between what the families wanted and commercial interests, and how the commercial interests had won out in the end. He asked where I was from and what I did. His daughter – trained as a political scientist – had travelled in Europe. And his family – he described himself as an eleventh-generation immigrant: his ancestor had come as an indentured labourer from England in 1680. I asked what he thought of the Memorial. His response was to talk about asymmetric warfare: states with plenty of money but little imagination, and amateurs with their more creative approach. He talked of individual heroes from US history – amateurs of their time with names I don't recognise – and the revolution that the Freedom Tower, 1,776 feet high, commemorates. As he talks I imagine what it might be like one day – when the construction site has resolved itself into a part of the city – to cross the street to the plaza with its trees and pools.

Finally, I turn away. There is a strong wind rounding the corner of 4 World Trade Center – one of the new skyscrapers, which websites say will provide 'highly efficient, collaborative workspaces, unrivalled access to mass transit, and a perfect work-life balance' – and I need to move. I say goodbye to my guide and walk around aimlessly for a little. The people going into the site through the entrance are moving swiftly. I contemplate joining them again, but don't. The souvenir

shop is packed. I find Rector Street subway, and leave. My anger has dissipated. When I had told colleagues at the New School of my first visit to the memorial that week, they had asked what I'd thought. 'I didn't like it at all', I said. Why not? 'Commercialisation', was my short reply, no time to elaborate before our panel began. Later, in other conversations, I was offered excuses: it was controversial, the Federal Government had refused to finance it, the architects were working within the constraints of a difficult site and too many contending client interests.

And after all, you/we/they are entitled to concrete over the cracks, to reorient the city around new towers, to forget. 'You had the IRA', my impromptu guide at the memorial on my last day had said. Yes, I thought, we did. We had our Blitz, our Dresden, our Hiroshima, and our shock and awe too. And we immigrated to the United States and forgot them. We learned of your revolutionary war, of your heroes. We learned to be good defenders of freedom and commerce. We tourists come now, in our thousands, looking for the day thousands like us were erased, rubbed out, turned to dust: the day you seemed to realise we all share a vulnerability. We come to hold you in our arms, as Toni Morrison put it.[3] But we find that you have thoroughly forgotten what that might have been, and where that might have led. You have even forgotten the horror of the use of other people's bodies as weapons, doubled by their incorporation into appalling acts of revenge – and now, triumphalism. And so, perhaps, have we. We take our photographs, buy our souvenirs, and leave. There are no echoes here of that time, of those dead. Even 'the ancient atoms' they have become have disappeared.[4] The world has been put back together, bigger and better. Trees planted, earth levelled, the past and its remains neatly boxed into museums and repositories that we can visit or not as we choose.

I am reminded of Michael Frayn's play about the building of the atom bomb in the 1940s – the time when the surface of the earth immediately beneath the point of detonation of an atomic bomb was designated 'ground zero'. In that play, a future beyond memory, beyond redemption, is imagined. 'When all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone,' Frayn asks, 'What will be left of our beloved world? Our ruined and dishonoured and beloved world?' All

that remains, for Frayn, is 'this most precious meanwhile'.[5] Time to wander, perhaps, in ground zeros: not of atomic bombs but of other, lesser disasters.

I haven't often written as I did that Tuesday in New York: a hand-written narrative, pencil on lined paper, urgent and fluid. The last time I can remember doing such a thing is after the birth of my first child, when I wrote to remember the pain. I knew I would forget its intensity and its impact. I folded *that* writing away in an envelope; I haven't looked at it since. *This* writing has continued to worry at me. Back in the UK, I wrote the second half of the narrative, puzzled by where the writing was leading. Slowly, I began to acknowledge what had been there all along, perhaps: an intense sense of bereavement, not for the loss itself, but the loss of the loss. It seemed it was not so much what the place had become that had upset me, but that the place – the hole, the pit – had been covered over, filled in, erased, as, inevitably, it had to be: 'Someone has to tidy up.'[6]

Or do they? The tidying up, the rebuilding, the memorialising entail a forgetting of the trauma – that which is beyond words, that reminds us of the beyond of words, of what cannot be put into words; that which reminds us of the fragility of our worlds, and challenges us to live with and alongside that fragility. But can we, could we, should we take up that challenge? I used to think that some memorial practices did that, refusing closure, refusing a rewriting of authority and authorisation, refusing a new beginning along the same lines as the old.[7] But I think I may have given up on memory, or rather on practices of memory, now. I'm not sure I know why.

Giving up on dreams may be necessary, but it is very hard, whether it is dreams of happy endings or dreams of no endings at all. My dream of no ending was not that, perhaps, but a dream that holding on to trauma, encircling it, can save us. Nothing can save us. I say that, but I refuse to believe it. I shall carry the trauma, folded in an envelope, in my pocket. Maybe that is what most of us do, most of the time, memorials or no memorials.

*New York 2014*

## Notes

1   I would like to thank Alexandra Délano for her invitation to the workshop *Memory, Migration, Materiality* at the New School, New York, which provided the occasion for the visit I describe here, and Naeem Inayatullah, Véronique Pin-Fat and Maja Zehfuss for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts. The chapter was first published, without illustrations, in *Narrative Global Politics*, edited by Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

2   Wisława Szymborska, 'The End and the Beginning.' In *Poems New and Collected, 1957–1997*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1998, 228–9.

3   Toni Morrison, 'The Dead of September 11.' *Vanity Fair*, November 2001, 48–9.

4   Morrison, 'The Dead of September 11.'

5   Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998: 96.

6   Szymborska, 'The End and the Beginning.'

7   Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

# 7
# Tracing disappearance[1]

*Nothing … is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are
only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.*
<div align="right">– Jacques Derrida[2]</div>

Memorial practices are especially difficult in cases of disappearance.
Ordinary practices of memory don't work, and yet memory has to be
continually kept alive. Families are thrown into a deep, unresolvable
crisis. When someone goes missing, relatives have to hold two contra-
dictory thoughts in mind at the same time: the person may be dead,
or, they may walk through the door at any moment.[3] The disappeared
person is in some profound sense both absent and present: in physical
body they are absent, but in social terms, they are present – they
cannot be laid to rest. Practices of memory and grieving are put on
hold. Tracing what has happened and where the missing person or
their remains might be becomes a life-consuming task. Those left
behind are compelled to search for their relatives: roaming the streets
hoping to catch sight of them; racking their brains to think of what
might have happened; tracing mobile phone records; searching for
remains that can be identified. At the same time, the missing person's
room is often kept ready, their possessions pristine, a note on the door
in case they should return. When the person has gone missing as a
result of enforced disappearance, there is a third imperative: holding
the authorities to account, demanding their co-operation, exposing
their culpability, and seeking justice.

In this chapter, I examine two particular forms that this demand for
justice has taken, both in Mexico, where disappearances are ongoing,
not in the past. First, I look at a project called *Huellas de la Memoria*

or, in English, *Footprints of Memory*.[4] We know that the missing body leaves traces: clothes and other possessions; photographs; stories and memories. But the searching bodies also leave traces – and these are what the project is based around: the traces in their worn-out shoes of the journeys that relatives have made in their searching, marching, and protesting. The soles are engraved with the names and details of the missing person and the messages of those searching. Packed into suitcases, these shoes travel the world, testifying to what has happened. The project is an example of a slow, painstaking remaking of a world unmade by violence, as well as a demand for political change and justice.[5]

Second, I explore the Forensic Architecture project, *The Ayotzinapa Case: A Cartography of Violence*. While *Footprints of Memory* was initially the inspiration of one individual and the costs were small, this second project is a piece of commissioned research undertaken by a university-based group that is by now well established. The Forensic Architecture project gathered existing publicly available data on the Ayotzinapa case, where forty-three students were forcibly disappeared in Iguala in 2014. It translated traces of what happened recorded in reports and testimony into a series of data points on an interactive platform. By combining the traces to produce a visualisation of the scene of crime, the project aims to facilitate further investigations.[6]

In previous chapters, I have explored the role of academic work and the assumptions of certainty, security and individuality on which much of that work is based. The academic is expected to be an expert in their field, to gather data, to identify cause and effect, and to translate their research into recommendations for policy that can bring about a better world. I have examined the problems with this approach and with the desire, common among academics and students alike, to change the world. Chapter 2 showed how the search for cause and effect perpetuates the status quo, and how seeking to intervene can be dangerous; Chapter 3 contrasted such approaches with notions of uncertainty and entanglement in the physical sciences. In Chapter 4, I examined the dilemmas of humanitarianism, and the separations and distinctions that the concept relies on and perpetuates, and in Chapter 5 I argued that the very desire of memory scholars to change the world reinstalls the form of linear, progressive temporality they seek to challenge.

In each case, I posed a question. Given these difficulties, what are academics to do? Academics are privileged, but they cannot and do not stand apart from the world. The idea that they can and that therefore they should tell others what needs to be done betrays an arrogance and a disregard for other forms of knowing and a willingness to trump differing political strategies.

In this chapter the question shifts slightly. It becomes a question of what we do once we, as academics, acknowledge that certainty and security are an impossible fantasy, that individuals are not separate but intimately and primarily interconnected beings, and that time and space, past and future, are not neutral linear backgrounds against which life plays out. What if we acknowledge all that? What if this new cosmology becomes how we see the world? Where does that leave us in terms of political action, or, as Madeleine Fagan might put it, 'practical political decisions'?[7] It becomes perhaps even less acceptable to seek to impose our thinking on others, but the question of what to do, and what being academics might enable us to do, remains.

Relatives of those who have been disappeared are likely to have lost any belief they might have had in the state as a benign force, or the world as safe and secure. What we call social reality, the fantasy that provides comfort for many of us, particularly those of us in privileged positions of one sort or another, may no longer function.[8] Relatives have to find a way of living with real uncertainty and insecurity – and how they do that can provide instructive lessons for the rest of us. For them, time may have in many senses stood still: they cannot move forward until their relative has been accounted for. And they are likely to be acutely aware that the idea of a separate, defined individuality is a fiction. A disappearance, like a death, is not an individual affair. It can lead to a reworking of family relationships as a whole: who everyone is changes. As Judith Butler says,

> It's not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. … On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well.[9]

The circles of connection spiral outwards, and lives are interconnected in complex and difficult to delimit ways.

But despite all this, relatives also want to insist on the demand for justice and the search for certainty. They want their relatives back. If that's not possible, they want to find their remains and to know what happened to them. The person they are looking for may well not be an 'individual', but they are singular, irreplaceable. As academics we need to consider the practical implications of where our thinking leads. Jacques Derrida points out that absence and presence, like other dichotomies, are not simple opposites: one is haunted by the other.[10] But the impossibility of presence, and the insistence that all we ever have are traces: these ideas cannot be countenanced by relatives of the disappeared. On the contrary, the cry is: 'They took them away alive, we want them back alive.' In this context, the idea, put forward in my book *Missing: Persons and Politics*, that, in the sense that we can never fully 'know' each other or ourselves, we are all 'missing persons', is worse than irrelevant.[11]

With the slightly altered question I have identified in mind, the chapter begins by exploring the two projects mentioned, how they came to be produced, and what was involved. Both work with traces of disappearance, but in very different ways.

### Footprints of Memory

Disappearance in Mexico is an ongoing problem, not something in the past, as in other parts of Latin America. The official National Register records 34,656 people who remain missing or disappeared, but the figure excludes a number of categories.[12] Impunity is widespread, as the government fails to investigate cases or to identify remains found in mass graves.[13] Many argue that the figures are conservative; there are likely to be many more cases.[14] The situation remains dire, and it is against this background of ongoing and historic disappearances that *Footprints of Memory* was conceived.

The idea for the project emerged when artist Alfredo López Casanova joined the Mothers' March in Mexico City on 10 May 2013. Mothers' Day is an important date in Mexico, and from 2012 a demonstration has been staged every year on that day to protest disappearances and demand justice. López's attention was captured by the marching feet. He looked at the shoes the marchers were wearing,

some almost worn out. As he describes it: 'For some reason I focussed on the marching shoes and I realised how worn out they were and I began to imagine how far these people had walked.'[15] He spoke to a couple of mothers he knew, and used their shoes to explore the idea he had.[16] Text from the relative would be engraved on the sole of the shoe. The letters would be reversed. The sole would then be covered in ink using a roller, and then pressed carefully onto a sheet of A4 paper to make a single print – a footprint – with the wording the right way round and legible. 'This becomes the footprint of the relative that is searching', López explains. It was like the process of making a linocut print, but without the attention to artistic precision. Attention to other things was more important: how the person who donated the shoes feels at every stage of the process, for example.[17] Ordinary A4 paper is used, and if the lettering doesn't come out clearly, small additions are made with a brush to make sure the message is readable. 'Because this isn't an art project but a way to denounce,' says López, 'it doesn't matter if we alter the print in a few places.'[18]

Feedback when the first few pairs were posted online on a Facebook page was positive, and López soon began receiving shoes from other relatives – people he knew and some he didn't.[19] He would exchange shoes – giving the relative another pair in place of the one they gave him for the project. Other pairs would arrive by post. All types of shoes arrived: 'sandals of people from Guerrero, boots, work boots, cowboy boots; there are shoes of all kinds that say a lot about who they belong to'. There were soon too many for López to keep up with on his own, and he had in any case always intended to make it a co-operative project.[20] A series of volunteers joined to help, forming the start of what would become very much a collective endeavour. As the type of shoe varied, so did the method developed to do the engraving: some with a linocutter – a laborious manual process – others with a power tool. In Mariana Rivera García's short film, we see López receiving some shoes from Colombia, together with a letter, and explaining to the group of helpers what to do:

> Almost all the shoes arrive like this. They would like some of this text to be engraved in the shoe. This can be engraved with the linocutter, so these are ready to engrave. This sandal is from

a mum who is searching for her daughter who disappeared in Puerto Vallarta. The text is already written on. We can't use the linocutter here. We are going to try with this.[21]

Some shoes are not suitable for either method and need lino glued to them: the words are engraved onto the lino before it is glued to the sole. The colour of the ink is usually green, to signify hope in the ongoing search for a person who is missing. Black is used when the disappeared person has been found dead, and red is reserved for when the relative is murdered in the search.[22] The details of the missing person are generally engraved on the sole of the left shoe, and the message from the relative searching on the right.[23]

Sometimes shoes arrive with some information but with details missing – for example, where the person disappeared – and the team does some internet research to fill in the gaps:

> This is very important because we are also denouncing disappearances in Colombia, disappearances in Guatemala, disappearances in Honduras, and there is some interest to get shoes from El Salvador. Many of these cases are of those who disappear while migrating. There is a big problem of disappearance of migrants from Central America. Veracruz is a very dangerous region, and many Central Americans disappear in Tampico, Tamaulipas.[24]

The letters that arrive with the shoes are moving, and often share the story of what happened as well as what the disappearance of a relative does:

> No one ever imagines it would be possible to live with so much pain. … Hope is never lost and you become a dreamer, you imagine that at any moment they could return. This hope is eternal and at times I don't want to know what happened, we only want to keep the beautiful and unforgettable memories.[25]

'Memory is important', says López. 'In terms of how we measure our past, to forget our disappeared is a kind of defeat, it's like giving up.'

When over eighty pairs of shoes had been received, engraved and printed, an exhibition was organised in Mexico City, at the Museo

Casa de la Memoria Indómita, a café and history museum established by relatives of the disappeared from the late 1960s and 1970s, and devoted to events and exhibitions centred around protesting disappearance.[26] The shoes were hung on long strings from supports stretched across the ceiling of the high room, and the prints placed under each shoe. It opened on 9 May 2016, the eve of that year's Mother's March. Many of those who had given their shoes to the collection attended.

Since then, exhibitions have been organised in other locations. Danielle House writes:

> When asked what they wanted to happen to their shoes after the exhibition, those relatives I spoke to said they want their shoes to travel, to continue to testify to the crimes of enforced disappearance and the searching they are undertaking.[27]

The shoes have indeed continued to travel. An extensive European tour, organised by groups of volunteers in different countries, was scheduled to come to a close in December 2017, having taken in several cities in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain and Belgium. The first stop was in London in March 2017; the second was Aberystwyth. By now practised in the engraving process, having worked with López in Mexico, House engraved one of her own shoes to make a print that formed the image for the poster advertising the exhibition.[28] The exhibition was held in a community arts space and opened with live music and film screenings: Mariana Rivera García's *Huellas Para La Memoria* and Tatiana Hueso's *Ausencias*.[29] A local activist choir, Côr Gobaith, prepared and sang a Mexican protest song especially for the event, which was shared on social media.

In each place the way the shoes were displayed was different. The local organisers chose the venue and the layout to fit the space. In Aberystwyth, the arrangement was similar to the first showing in Mexico City: the shoes were hung by threads from wires stretched across the room (Figure 7), and the prints placed on the floor underneath the shoes. In this way, installation is straightforward and costs are minimal. Visitors were provided with printed guides they could take round with them giving English and Welsh translations of the text on each shoe. This arrangement, like that in Mexico City, places

7   Engraved soles of shoes, *Footprints of Memory*, Ty Celf/Art House, Laura Place, Aberystwyth, April 2017

the relatives' footprints next to those of the visitors to the exhibition, a call perhaps to join them in the search (Figure 8). The shoes sway gently in the air, restless, almost as if they are alive. The comments left in the visitors' book show the anger, respect and solidarity people felt, and how the shoes had conveyed the pain of the search. One person wrote: 'Much love, respect and solidarity with the families of those who are disappeared. Our thoughts are with you and we will do our best to raise awareness and to not forget these heart-breaking truths.'[30]

It is significant that the footprints are not the footprints of the missing; the shoes are not their shoes, as some commentary on the first exhibition assumed.[31] They are the footprints of the living, those searching for the traces of disappeared people and demanding action. The project is a making and remaking of life through the co-production of traces.

Although López describes the shoes as 'a symbol, an element where we could try to make visible their journey', for me they are much more than symbolic.[32] The shoes are tangible, and they carry the material trace of the searching relative. They are worn out. They

8    Shoes hanging above their footprints. *Footprints of Memory*, Ty Celf/
Art House, Laura Place, Aberystwyth, April 2017

smell. They're dirty. The imprint of the feet that wore them is visible. Traces of the pain are carried in the shoes, as they travel further afield, traces of their owners and their owners' anguish – and their hope and determination. Each small step the relatives have taken in the course of their search – 'to the Attorney General's office, organised crime investigative offices, and protests to the Federal Government asking where their children are' – each of these steps and each of these places are contained in the shoes.[33] It is, to my mind, the impact of these traces, and the stories they tell of persistence and doggedness in the face of atrocity, that moves people.

The traces already in the shoes are combined with the narratives engraved into the soles: new traces are made. The narratives are spare. They have to be: space is limited, and inscribing each letter by hand is a time-consuming, slow process. But the starkness adds power to the story. A few words often do more than many can. There is something telling, too, about the way the words have to be engraved as mirror images of themselves: they are only fully legible when the sole is printed. It's like the slender clues that the relatives are following, and the unknowing they seek to overcome. Their determination is that one day, all will be revealed.

The simplicity of the way the shoes are hung, the sheer number of pairs, and the range of styles and sizes, testify to the scale of the problem. But to hold in your hands one of these pairs and to feel and smell them is to feel a connection. It is an intimate, earthly appeal – relatives have surrendered their shoes, the very shoes that enable their struggle, so that the shoes can travel even further and can speak for them, in places their voices could not reach.

In addition to the shoes – their materiality, the traces they contain and the journeys they make – the way the project operates is important. Engraving the shoes by hand involves slow, intensive and painstaking work, and it is done by small groups working together in López's studio. As they carefully translate the words in the relatives' letters, first into reverse lettering on the soles, then into marks incised into the shoe, and finally into the paper prints, the stories are merged with the shoes themselves and absorbed by those working on them. Commitments are shared and communities built – of those in the co-operative working to carry the project forward, of the relatives

who have donated their shoes, and also, importantly, between the relatives and those engraving the shoes. Moreover, when the shoes travel, that community becomes larger, incorporating the volunteers at each exhibition site working on installing and publicising their exhibition, unpacking and repacking the shoes to send them on their way. The responses along the journey circle back to support the relatives in Mexico.

## A Cartography of Violence

In September 2014, the disappearance of forty-three students from the Rural Normal School of Ayotzinapa led to widespread outrage, and raised the public profile of enforced disappearances. However, what seemed like a moment that could challenge the culture of impunity passed, and the government weathered the storm.[34] The case was not properly investigated, although some charges were brought, and the missing students have not been found. In part to ensure what happened is not forgotten, Forensic Architecture, a group based at Goldsmiths, University of London, produced an interactive platform that documents 'the level of collusion and coordination between state agencies and organised crime'.[35]

Immediately after the disappearance of the forty-three students, the authorities made several attempts to declare the case closed. Narratives that would later be shown to be false were put forward as 'the historical truth'. It was claimed that the students had been killed by criminal elements, their bodies burned at an open rubbish tip and the remains gathered in plastic bags and dumped in the river – a claim that was clearly ridiculous given the difficulty of disposing of bodies in that way. Supposed remains were sent for identification to a forensic laboratory in Austria, but only one identification resulted: a fragment of bone allegedly matched the DNA of one of the students.[36]

In 2015, a six-month investigation by an Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights produced a report denouncing the Mexican government's investigation. In addition to throwing doubt on the account of the burning of the bodies, their report highlighted numerous other

'irregularities, inconsistencies and/or omissions' in the original investigation.[37] The Group's work was extended for a further six months and a second report published. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team later confirmed that there was no evidence to support the government's version; although the remains of bodies were found at the site, there was nothing to link these bodies with the forty-three Ayotzinapa students and no evidence of a sustained fire at the time of the disappearances. They questioned the chain of custody of the bone fragment identified by the laboratory in Austria and noted that it showed no evidence of fire damage. Another supposed identification was based on tests insufficient to be conclusive.[38]

Forensic Architecture's work was commissioned by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team and Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez. It draws on numerous publicly available sources in a range of forms: photographs and videos, telephone logs, oral and written witness accounts, and details of the spatial layout of the scenes of crime recorded by Forensic Architecture themselves. Its major sources are the two reports produced by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, and interviews with surviving students conducted by journalist John Gibler for his book *An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzinapa*.[39] The project breaks down the data in the reports and interviews into individual traces or data points and reassembles them digitally to form an interactive resource. The idea is that this platform allows the general public to examine the traces, recombine them in different ways, and reinterpret them for themselves. Parents and surviving students are making use of the platform.[40] The digital assemblage and mapping of traces allows new conclusions to be drawn about what happened.[41] The platform was shown at an exhibition at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City which ran from September 2017 to the end of that year.[42]

The Ayotzinapa project was something of a new departure for Forensic Archtecture. Their previous work focused largely on examining the built environment, as one might examine a corpse, searching for evidence to build up a picture of what has happened.[43] As a forensic anthropologist working in a criminal investigation might trace the trajectory of a bullet as it is inscribed in flesh to determine where the

shot came from, so Forensic Architecture would examine damage to the built environment and put this together with photographs and eyewitness reports to trace the source of an explosion, and determine who was likely to have been responsible. They would correlate the angle of the sun in an image, and the buildings that were visible in the background, with eyewitness testimony, putting the evidence together with a painstaking attention to detail and accuracy. Over a series of projects they developed ways not only of assembling their data digitally, but also of presenting it in that way too: maps, reconstructions, overlays, timelines and visualisations that together produced a tool that could be used by anyone.

The Ayotzinapa interactive platform appears daunting at first sight. It takes a while to learn how it works, and how to move through the different mappings, models and scenes with their elaborate colour codings and keys. The site provides a series of video user guides, and a version of what happened, with images from the platform, is narrated in an 18-minute video reconstruction.[44] The conclusion of the video is unambiguous:

> This reconstruction demonstrates that the different forces involved … were acting in different capacities throughout the night: as perpetrators or observers of violence. … It also demonstrates that the violent phases, including the enforced disappearance of the students, took place almost simultaneously in the presence of different state agencies in different parts of the city. These events support the conclusion that the attacks were coordinated and that multiple state security agencies colluded together. All the agencies were active that night, but none prevented the violence, making the Mexican government apparatus responsible in the killing of civilians and the ongoing enforced disappearance of the 43 students.[45]

The video voice-over is neutral, objective. Images move seamlessly from shocking, grainy images taken on the night to the clean, toy-like buses and trucks of the model scenarios, one melting into the other, superimposed. The various participants are represented by upright figurines of different colours, reminiscent, unsurprisingly, of the figures in architects' glossy brochures, but less animated and even more

unnatural. It is difficult to imagine how someone who was involved, or a relative, would feel, seeing these reconstructions. There is an air of grim unreality and horror. It is almost as if the violence has been disavowed, or disappeared even, but waits, just beneath the surface, to erupt again. Whereas in *Footprints of Memory*, the shoes contain the smell and the trace of the feet that wore them, and the sweat of the struggle, in *Cartography of Violence*, all material remains have been translated into abstract data. And yet, exploring the timelines and the scenes of crime in more detail, it becomes clear that the horror of what happened – the co-ordination of the attacks, the determination and the inhumanity of those carrying them out and those observing them – is all the more apparent for being understated. It is only a certain detachment that allows one to take it in fully at all.

In the first pages of his book, Eyal Weizman, founder of Forensic Architecture, describes what they do:

> We seek … to reverse the forensic gaze and to investigate the same state agencies – such as the police or the military – that usually monopolize it. We locate incidents in their historical contexts and pull from their microphysical details the longer threads of political and social processes – and reconnect them to the world of which they are part. … [Forensic architecture], importantly, challenges architects to use their disciplinary tools to make claims publicly and politically in the most antagonistic of forums.[46]

It is a practice 'that finds traces of ruptures and gaps in the dominant and "well-constructed lies" of rich states and corporations':[47]

> Political activists and other militants strive … not on the solid ground of state-sponsored science but rather on weak signals, often at the threshold of visibility, pushing against the flood of obfuscating messages, of dominant narratives, fabricated noise, and attempts at denial.[48]

Like *Footprints of Memory*, Forensic Architecture's project is an example of how academics can work closely with activists and employ traces of violence in order to contest enforced disappearance and demand certainty.

In the course of her postgraduate fieldwork in Mexico, Danielle House – a student I was supervising – became one of the small group of people working with López on *Footprints* at the beginning of the project and was part of the team that installed the first exhibition in Mexico City. Several other academics were also part of the group. House runs the English version of the website, and wrote subtitles for the Rivera García vimeo on the project. She helped bring the shoes to Europe, and set the European tour in motion. Other academics were closely involved in the tour: hosting relatives who travelled with the shoes, arranging events, spreading the message.

However, unlike the Forensic Architecture project, the idea for *Footprints* did not emerge from an academic source. *Footprints,* House says, 'just happens to have some people involved who are academics; others are artists, journalists, photojournalists. … Academics, like anyone, can support it.'[49] She sees the Forensic Architecture project as 'academic activist work', while recognising that academic and activist work cannot be separated in the first place. Indeed much of our academic work, as far as I can see, comprises small, slow processes of making and remaking the world. Our research involves sifting through traces – of argument, of evidence, of narrative – to compile our contributions, even if they are not directly aimed at helping, or providing tools for, those fighting for justice. In our pedagogy, too, we may design modules that, like Scarry's woman making a coat, are not aimed to produce 'a course' per se, but to 'remake human sentience'.[50] Of course, the context in which we work will sometimes make that difficult, as I discuss further in Chapter 10.

### Traces of presence/absence

Derrida reminds us that 'nothing … is anywhere ever simply present or absent'. For relatives of people who have been disappeared, this doesn't make sense: their relative is clearly absent. But to say, as Derrida is doing, that concepts of presence and absence are complicated is not to say that a person who has been disappeared is not missing. They are not to be found; their relatives do not know where they are. They do not know whether they are alive or dead. And the pressing need to know drives a search for any traces that might lead to

a resolution of the agonising uncertainty. What Derrida is drawing our attention to is how presence and absence are never *simple* opposites. One is always haunted by traces of the other. Pure presence and pure absence are impossible. For us to know that someone is here, now, present in front of us or held in our arms, we must have a notion of what it would be like if they were not. It is the difference between the two that gives meaning to the feeling of presence. Or in other words, presence is never simply presence: it is haunted by traces of absence. In a similar way, when someone is absent, the trace of their presence is still felt – in the home, for example. They are only missing because they are not where they should be, because there is someone who misses them. Absence and presence are thus intertwined. The one is always imbued with traces of the other.

We compose our world through our perceptions of these 'differences and traces of traces'.[51] We assemble them from a chaotic flow of sense data into what then *appears* to contemporary common sense as a world of separate individuals and distinct material objects, which are either present or absent against a smooth backdrop of time, and a neutral background of space. Such separation and distinction is apparent – and produced – not inherent in the world. Not everyone does this in the same way: people differ neurologically and although for most people, 'objects and subjects are seen and not their process of coming-into-form', for others, 'perception dwells in the interstitial, perceiving the process itself'. They do not categorise without being aware of what they are doing, as neurotypicals do, but display 'a deep sensitivity' to the process, 'to the coming-into-itself of form in experience'.[52]

The idea that there are only ever traces of traces, like the idea that we can never know everything for certain that I explored in Chapter 3, is not something that we can overcome, but the way the world 'really *is*'.[53] Accepting this notion requires us to revise our ideas of existence: we need to consider it possible that nothing ever '*is*' in quite the way we were led to think it was. That is difficult for many to accept, especially since what we think of as just '"everyday language" is not innocent or neutral' in this regard. On the contrary, 'it is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it … a considerable number of presuppositions'.[54] Those who have faced

the disappearance of a relative or friend, or who live in circumstances where this could happen to them at any time, may have already found these presuppositions thrown into doubt.

The thought that someone can be there one minute and gone the next seems unfathomable – and intolerable. And yet our current notions of time, being and existence demand that we think it possible. If we see ourselves as separate, distinct individuals, then that seems to be what happens when someone disappears. It feels as though it should be easier to accept if we have a body, if the body is not missing. But when we view the corpse of someone we knew well, laid out at the undertakers, it is sometimes the sense that the person we knew is *not there* that prevails. The body fails to answer the question: Where have they gone? Ariel Dorfman's poem *Last Will and Testament* urges continuing disbelief in the case of the disappeared. 'When they ask you to identify the body,' he says,

> when they tell you
> that I am
> completely absolutely definitely
> dead
> Don't believe them,
> Don't believe them,
> Don't believe them.[55]

And in some senses, the dead haven't 'gone'. Families bear traces of relationships and deep interconnection. Long-dead ancestors bequeath their traces to the living. The idea of a separate, defined individuality becomes muted or absent in this context. Features bear witness to more than just family resemblance, and even inherited gestures resonate. These traces persist through generations. As I recount in Chapter 10, when my mother died, I sat with her all night, watching closely, intent on every nuance of breath and expression. The following day, when I got up and looked in the mirror, there she was, looking back at me. I have carried her with me ever since. I can feel myself moving as she did, making the same facial expressions: my movements and my features are no longer mine in the way they were before. None of this lessens the grief, but it reveals an unexpected and unsettling insight.

The absence of individuality is difficult to accept in a modern Western culture that operates on the assumption that we are all bounded rational subjects. That absence, and the difficulty it poses, is apparent not only in families but in the concorporeality of conjoined twins – two people in one body. Our need to separate these twins where possible – even at great risk to one or both of the people involved – testifies to our discomfort with the idea and our compulsion to normalise.[56] Though we like to forget it, organ recipients too are not pure individuals genetically. They carry more than one DNA signature: they quite literally carry the donor within them. Some report altered tastes and even personality.[57] Isabelle Dinoire, French recipient of the first face transplant, whose original injuries arose from her attempted suicide, now feels a responsibility to keep her donor alive in her. It's like having a twin sister. Dinoire can no longer think of suicide.[58]

It is recognised that ordinary twins share a special connection. What is less widely known is how even an unborn twin's genetic signature can be shared with the surviving twin. A paternity test later in life can show that the surviving twin's son is not genetically related to his father: the paternity test fails. Given the need to allocate paternity to a single person, the unborn uncle is assigned as biological father to a child.[59] Maternity tests can be fooled too. Such 'chimeric' genes are thought to be remnants of the genes of the lost twin, absorbed by the survivor in the womb. Although not often found and confirmed, chimeras may be fairly common, since 12.5 per cent of single births start out as multiple pregnancies.

Genetics are not the only trace that remains when someone dies, though it is genetics and DNA these days that enables us to identify 'unknown decedents' – unidentified human remains. Material remains – the scent on clothes, photographs, personal effects – outlive their owners, despite the injustice the survival of such objects seems to represent, as I noted in Chapter 1. It seems a betrayal almost that the accumulated trivia of a lifetime, and the traces of the body it carries, persist beyond the life itself. The importance of the personal effects of those killed in a disaster to surviving relatives and friends was often underestimated in the past, but the care needed in returning them is now recognised.[60]

We may throw these things away – wherever that 'away' is – or take them to a charity shop, when we, the survivors, eventually clear the house. But matter is imperishable. In fact 'nothing goes away', as Carolyn Steedman reminds us in her wonderful book *Dust*.[61] The book is an account that moves from the archive to the rag rug. In the archive, the dust from the bundles stored there, Steedman says, is 'the dust of the workers who made the papers and parchments; the dust of the animals who provided their skins for the leather bindings … the by-product of all the filthy trades that have by circuitous routes deposited their end products in the archive'.[62] It can produce archive fever: a real illness.[63] The rag rug is a colourful mat, made from fragments of old clothing, that sits in front of the hearth. In Steedman's words again, 'the rag rug carries with it the irreducible traces of an actual history, and that history cannot be made to go away'.[64] Steedman concludes her meditation on dust like this:

> This is what Dust is about; this is what dust is; what it means and what it is. It is not about rubbish, nor about the discarded; it is not about a surplus, left over from something else: *it is not about Waste*. Indeed, Dust is the opposite of Waste, or at least, the opposite principle to Waste. It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed. … Nothing goes away.[65]

Even 'the death of the material body' is, of course, nothing more than the restoration of the elements that made up the human body to the universe: to the stardust it is made from.[66] I return to this aspect in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

For me, *Footprints of Memory* is not a memorial. Rather, it is an example of the slow and painstaking remaking of the world that Elaine Scarry talks about in the face of the violent unmaking of disappearance.[67] Moreover, it is a co-production. Scarry talks about the making of a coat as a way of making someone warm – a making of human sentience – as we saw in Chapter 2. *Footprints of Memory* purposefully remakes the shoe: it changes it from something made

to protect the searching feet into something that can voice the pain of the search and carry that pain, and the demand of justice, far and wide. But, in the process, the remaking of the shoe remakes the world. It reconstitutes relations and restores community. It creates a community of trust and solidarity in the face of the fear, isolation and distrust produced by enforced disappearance. It does this slowly, step by step, shoe by shoe.

Forensic Architecture's work can also be seen as a slow remaking of the world. First they collect material, and then break it down into its constituent elements. Then they reassemble the fragments to enable new sense to be made of what the traces mean and new truths to emerge that can contest government narratives. It is a slow, labour intensive, painstaking process, and one that employs digital methods to enable data analysis and correlation and the production of visualisations. It makes events visible differently. In the Ayotzinapa case, we can see the spatial and temporal connections between the different events, and grasp clearly how they form a coordinated pattern, revealing intention and complicity. It remakes the world as those who were the victims of state-orchestrated violence knew it.

In both these slow remakings of the world, the academics working with the survivors of the disappeared in Mexico act as data collectors, translators, engravers, assemblers, curators, organisers, transporters, analysers and facilitators. They do not dictate, they join in. They help put traces to work. They take part in the everyday remaking of the world.

Traces are important to relatives of the disappeared, people we call 'those left behind', and to the bereaved. Traces concern those who survive, those who live on. It is a question concerning absence and presence. Although both pure absence and pure presence may be impossible – nothing is either *simply* present or absent – that does not prevent us, as academics, from using traces to support the struggle of relatives for justice and for the return of those who have been forcibly disappeared. We can perhaps adopt a strategic belief in the possibility of pure presence, alongside the call 'You took them away alive: we want them back alive!'

In *Literature and the Ashes of History*, Cathy Caruth reflects on Freud's discussion of the child's *fort-da* game. This is the game where

a baby will throw their toys out of the pram – not in a fit of pique, as the saying implies, but rather in a serious attempt to understand the difficult question of absence and presence: to come to terms with it, to understand loss and parting, life and death. The toy is thrown away, and retrieved, only to be thrown away again. Freud first interprets this game as an enactment of the departure and return of the mother. But he then notes that the first act – the act of painful departure or loss – is staged more frequently than that of pleasurable return. He relates this act to the restaging in traumatic nightmares of the painful fright of a soldier's encounter with death. He asks: *What does it mean for life to bear witness to death?* Caruth suggests that 'it is the incomprehensible act of surviving – of waking into life – that repeats and bears witness to what remains ungrasped within the encounter with death'.[68] It is not death itself that is traumatic in the encounter with death, but the repetition of an awakening into life: survival. Caruth continues later: 'The witness of survival … lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned.'[69] Survival – living – involves the acceptance of an indeterminate future, one that can never be completely owned, alongside an indeterminate past. Those whose relatives have been disappeared wake to their own incomprehensible survival every morning.

*Footprints of Memory,* in its remaking of the world, and Forensic Architecture's reconstruction of the scenes of crime in Iguala are working with traces. At this point, traces are all there is, and these projects use them in their different ways to denounce and to demand justice. Lack of any acknowledgement of what has happened is perhaps one of the chief injustices – and what makes enforced disappearance state terror. Relatives live with contradiction, ambiguity, uncertainty. They seek certainty, true, but they cannot rely on what we call social reality – which is a social fantasy – to produce that, as others do. Their belief in the narratives of the state has been disappeared. They work in the absence of fantasy to remake a world around a shared acknowledgement of what the trauma of disappearance has taught them: that the world that others live within is an illusion. None of what I am saying is to propose that there is no need to hold to account, or to demand answers. There is, absolutely. And every additional trace

uncovered, or recombined in projects such as Forensic Architecture's, contributes towards an answer. It is to suggest that their way of living on – surviving – can perhaps show the rest of us what an ethos of living with the real of a world without guarantees would be like: a world where the future, as well as the past, is unpredictable. A world where nothing is ever fully present or absent, but where there are only traces of traces. And yet a world where action, protest, and the search for justice continues. Traces can be used to support that search. Academics – and others – help in small, practical ways with the everyday, slow, remaking of a world.

## Notes

1  I would like to thank Danielle House for her comments on earlier versions of this chapter and for sharing her work on disappearance in Mexico and the *Footprints* project in particular. Some of the thoughts that make up part of the chapter were aired in a workshop at Durham in June 2016 on *The Politics of Traces* organized by Arely Cruz Santiago, and I would like to thank her for the invitation and participants for their comments.

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3  Pauline Boss calls this 'ambiguous loss' (Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

4  Danielle House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory – Searching for the Disappeared.' *Latin American Bureau: Blogs: La Mezcia*, 1 July 2016. https://lab.org.uk/mexico-footprints-of-memory-searching-for-the-disappeared/.

5  Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. This notion was discussed in Chapter 2.

6  Eleanor Peake, 'In 2014, 43 Students Were Massacred. Can Digital Forensics Help Solve the Crime?' *Wired*, 7 September 2017. http://www.wired.co.uk/article/forensic-architecture-iguala-massacre-2014; Ryan Devereaux, 'Three years after 43 students disappeared in Mexico, a new visualization reveals the cracks in the government's story.' *The Intercept,* 7 September 2017. https://theintercept.com/2017/09/07/three-years-after-43-students-disappeared-in-mexico-a-new-visualization-reveals-the-cracks-in-the-governments-story/.

7  Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013: 1.

8  'What we call social reality' is Slavoj Žižek's phrase; see, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

9    Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004: 22.

10   Derrida, *Positions,* 26.

11   Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

12   Amnesty International, Report 2017/18 – Mexico. https://www.amnesty. org/en/countries/americas/mexico/report-mexico/.

13   Human Rights Watch, World Report 2017: Mexico: Events of 2016. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/mexico.

14   House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory.'

15   López, in Mariana Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria/Footprints of Memory.' Vimeo, 2017. https://vimeo.com/203656930: 8 minutes.

16   House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory.'

17   Danielle House, personal communication, November 2017.

18   López, in Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria.'

19   House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory.'

20   Danielle House, personal communication, November 2017.

21   He is referring to a small power drill. López, in Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria.'

22   House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory.'

23   FundarAC, 'Footprints with Memory: The Arts of Transitional Justice.' 8 July 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FdfaToQYGo.

24   López, in Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria.'

25   Extract from a relative's letter, read in Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria.'

26   Danielle House, 'Footprints of Memory.' Museo Casa de la Memoria Indómita. https://www.facebook.com/pages/Museo-Casa-De-La-Memo ria-Indómita/233074803542066.

27   House, 'Mexico: Footprints of Memory.'

28   Remembering Mexico's missing. *Ceredigion Herald*, 7 April 2017, 54. https://view.publitas.com/herald-newspapers-plc/ceredigion-herald-iss ue-54/page/30–31.

29   Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria'; Tatiana Huezo, *Ausencias* (Absences) Mexico/El Salvador, 2015, 26 minutes, colour, DVD. https:// vimeo.com/136160952.

30   Ruth Hogg, signed comment in *Footprints of Memory* Visitors' Book, Aberystwyth, 3 April 2017.

31   See for example Jonathan Zhou, 'Museum honors missing people in Mexico with an exhibit of their shoes.' *Epoch Times*, 12 May 2016. https://www.theepochtimes.com/museum-honors-missing-people-in-me xico-with-an-exhibit-of-their-shoes_2064563.html.

32   López, in FundarAC, 'Footprints with Memory.'

33   TRT World, '"Footprints of Memory" to Remember the Missing People in Mexico.' 18 May 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= JQ_2uvv6tyc.

34    Devereaux, 'Three years after.'

35    Forensic Architecture, *Ayotzinapa: A Cartography of Violence*. September 2017. http://www.plataforma-ayotzinapa.org.

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62    Steedman, *Dust*, 27.

63    Steedman plays on Derrida's archive fever (Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

64    Steedman, *Dust*, 128.

65    Steedman, *Dust*, 164. Original emphasis.

66    Steedman, *Dust*, 164.

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# 8

# Stardust[1]

*The Atacama Desert … is one place on the planet incredibly full of and alive with traces and footprints.*

– Patricio Guzmán[2]

Patricio Guzmán's film *Nostalgia for the Light* is set in the Atacama Desert in Chile.[3] The immense desert is visible from space: it is the only brown patch on the earth's surface. It is devoid of moisture, and hence devoid of life: no insects, birds, or vegetation are to be found there. The air is clear – transparent – and that makes the desert an ideal site for astronomers to set up their observatories. Its saline dryness means that objects – including human bodies – are preserved intact: mummified. It is thus a territory that archaeologists share with the astronomers: they gently probe the ground for signs of previous inhabitants, while astronomers scan the skies to find the origins of the universe. The desert was a place of transit: indigenous peoples traversed it on their way from the mountains to the sea. Miners came and went at the bidding of the mineral industry. And a miners' camp became the site of a concentration camp during the Pinochet dictatorship. Traces of all these comings and goings remain, eerily preserved in defiance of time, blown by an interminable wind, and under the watchful eyes of the stars.

The film explores themes of memory and existence, past and present, interweaving archaeology, astronomy and forensics. It is a film that has resonated with me ever since I first saw it, at a showing for the Performance and Politics group in Aberystwyth in February 2015. A deeply moving segment of the film for me, then, was when, towards the end of the film, one of the women searching the desert for

the remains of her husband, disappeared during the 1970s, dreams of the possibility that the telescopes, now focused on the stars, could instead be turned downwards to scan the desert for traces of human remains. It was not only the pathos of that dream, and its impossibility, that I found moving, but her apologetic yet barely concealed anger at the injustice of the fortune spent on cosmological research while the needs of relatives of the disappeared were disregarded. In this chapter I explore how this contrast and its politics is brought out in the film.

The film also spoke to me, as I realised much later, because it brought together many of the themes that have inspired my work over the years, and that are reflected in this book: the contrast between academics and activists; the slow, painstaking work of remaking the world; the impossibility of certainty; the connections between the living and the dead, stars and mountains; the wisdom of the everyday; and the absence of the present. It places my past as a scientist alongside my work as a scholar, but does more than that. At the end of the film, Guzmán talks of a time when 'each of us could carry the entire universe in the depths of our pockets'.[4] I would want to say that we still do that, whether we know it or not. That is where dreams – and memories – live: in the dust and fragments at the bottom of our pockets.

Portions of Guzmán's voice over in *Nostalgia for the Light* are reminiscent of Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, the film discussed in Chapter 5. Towards the beginning he talks of 'moments frozen in time', and in his account of the history of Chile, the phrase 'some time later, a coup d'état swept away democracy, dreams and science' seems to echo Marker's 'sometime after came the destruction of Paris'.[5] The pacing is similar, as is the tone of the voice-over, and the stillness of the moving images. Marker and Guzmán met, in Chile, in May 1972. Guzmán told Marker, twenty years his senior, that he had watched *La Jetée* fifteen times.[6] However, despite these echoes, for me Guzmán's work contains the potential for a demand for justice absent from *La Jetée*. It refuses an easy demonisation of the perpetrators, and it demands a politics. Archaeologist Lautaro Núñes, one of the film's protagonists, explains how bodies of the disappeared were dug up and loaded onto trucks to be taken elsewhere. He reminds us

that it was people who did this, working under military command. He calls on the military to reveal what they know so that the dead can be given a proper burial.

*Nostalgia for the Light* can be seen as what Mike Pearson calls chorography. His writing entails 'the scrutiny of the lived experiences of land, of the interrelationships of performance and the everyday, and of the entangled nature of land, human subject and event'.[7] Chorography, as he enacts it, involves paying attention to geology and landscape, movement and trace, memory and remains, practice and performance. It acknowledges the body as located in place, and the specificity of place in a larger region. Biography becomes *mystory*, which 'blurs the boundary between critical and creative writing, auto-biography and cultural history, one text and the next' and moves between 'personal, popular and expert'.[8] But it is a *mystory* that is firmly situated in a landscape that 'owes its character not only to the experiences it affords – as sights, sounds, etc. – but also to what is done there'. Pearson continues: 'Human activities are written into the landscape and daily passages become biographic encounters with traces and memories of past activities.'[9] It is no accident that Pearson, a theatre performer and director but trained as an archaeologist, brings a forensic sensitivity to landscape and to scenes of crime in particular.[10]

In this chapter I trace *Nostalgia for the Light* as chorography. I explore how it rewrites the idea of the past through its superposition of astronomical, archaeological, personal and political pasts, and, centrally, through its destabilizing of the idea of the present. Guzmán's chorography is not earthbound: it integrates sky and stars into the landscape. The cosmos is imagined, and photographed, from the Atacama Desert, 'an absolute, universal archaeological site in which *everything* comes from the past'.[11] I explore whether in the end the film disappoints: whether it raises but ultimately perhaps fails to address questions of justice and politics.

### Astronomers and archaeologists

As the film begins, the sounds of metal on metal echo around us as an old German telescope in the Atacama Desert slowly opens. Wheels

turn, cogs engage with cogs, chains link element to element, tracks guide the movement, and markers align precisely with scales engraved on polished brass. Circles within circles, wheels within wheels, turning slowly but inexorably as the mechanism comes to life. Viewers are invited to slow down themselves: this is not going to be a film that reveals itself swiftly: patience will be required. There is something vaguely threatening about the scene, though. The power and precision of the instrument, man-made for sure, but somehow its movement is now beyond control: an instrument, but of what?

The circles are repeated in shots of the surface of the moon that follow. The next scene is a domestic, everyday setting. Sunlight through rustling leaves reveals a kitchen and household objects: a radio, chairs, tapestry-work cushions, a picture of the last supper, an old-fashioned sewing machine. The voice-over tells us these objects could have come from the narrator's childhood home. We are shown the outside of the house, and a tree, green in the wind: a simple, everyday life, where nothing happens. Then came revolution, and alongside it, the arrival of the scientists and their machines for looking at the sky. Later, the revolution was swept away, but the astronomers remained, doing their work. A cloud of dust slowly covers the view of the outside of the house as we move to the next scene.

The juxtaposition of the telescopes with other scenes continues throughout the film. Interspersed are images of the cosmos: star sequences generated digitally from still images photographed by a camera positioned in a telescope.[12] Modern telescopes are shown: beautiful contraptions moving into position with steely precision and the same echoing sounds that accompanied the old German telescope we were shown at the start. Observatories ranged with geometrical accuracy side by side on mountain tops overlook the desert like white domed temples. Early on in the film we meet the first of its 'characters': astronomer Gaspar Galaz. He reflects on the connection between religion and science, and the big questions both ask: 'Where do we come from, where are we and where are we going?' Science, he says, is 'never resolved. That's what I like about it.'

Later in the same conversation, Galaz broaches the question of time and the past. Guzmán sees *the past* as a notion he can use to frame the film and to connect archaeologists, astronomers and the women

searching for remains. Galaz explains how everything is past: how the present doesn't exist:

> All of our life experiences, including this conversation, happened in the past. Even if it is a matter of millionths of a second. The camera I am looking at now is a few metres away and is therefore already several millionths of a second in the past in relation to the time on my watch. The signal takes time to arrive. The light reflected from the camera or from you, reaches me after a moment. A fleeting moment, as the speed of light is very fast.[13]

The implication is, Galaz explains to Guzmán, that 'The present doesn't exist.' 'It's true', he asserts, presumably responding to a sceptical look from Guzmán. Astronomers are looking at what happened a very long time ago indeed, given the time that light from the stars and distant galaxies takes to arrive at the telescopes in Atacama. Galaz explains, 'The past is the astronomers' main tool. We manipulate the past. We are used to living behind the times. That's how it is.' At the end of the conversation, Guzmán says, 'The present is a fine line.' 'A puff of air would destroy it', the astronomer replies.

After we have met Galaz for the first time, archaeologist Lautaro Núñes, the second protagonist of the film, shows us carvings made by pre-Colombian shepherds on rock faces and boulders. Back in his office, he talks to Guzmán of the connection with the astronomers: 'They study one past and we study another. They are in the present recording a past which they have to reconstruct. They have only minute clues. They are archaeologists like us.' The astronomers and the archaeologists share the same space – the Atacama Desert – because the unique dryness of the climate suits them both. Guzmán suggests that the Atacama is a gateway to the past. Núñes responds, 'That's right. It's a gateway we know how to go through. But when we come out again, will we have made discoveries that will shake our lives forever? This remains a mystery to me.'

Despite this gateway, a paradox remains: Chile has not yet considered its own nearest past. Núñes points out that little is known of the nineteenth century, with its mining history, or the fate of the indigenous peoples. The camera takes us back into the desert and shows us the graves where, 'like geological layers, layers of miners and

of Indians are swept by a relentless wind'. In a haunting scene, set in the remains of a miners' camp, their shoes, their jackets, their other belongings lie abandoned and preserved. Spoons hanging from the ceiling make the gentle sound of a wind chime as they knock against each other.

We return to the echoing interior of an observatory for a time, before we are shown a more primitive device for observing the stars that was used by prisoners in one of Pinochet's concentration camps – Chacabuco – set up by just adding barbed wire to the remains of a nineteenth-century miner's camp like the one we visited earlier. We meet Luís Henríquez, a former prisoner there and part of a group who found a sense of freedom through observing the stars from the camp. And we meet architect Miguel Lawner, who was held in five different camps, and who made measurements and drawings from memory to preserve a detailed record of the camps and what it was like there.

Then we are back at the telescopes, this time a new radio telescope in the process of being constructed. It is somehow surprising to see the engineers at work, apparently disembowelling this invincible mechanical creature that otherwise seems to have a life of its own, rotating inexorably, the sound echoing once more.

At this point the narrative turns. We meet a young engineer working on the project, Victor Gonzáles, and his mother, who is not named. She works with ex-prisoners who were tortured. They both work with the past, but there is a difference. His mother explains:

> The women who search for their dead demand an answer from those responsible for the disappearances. These women come across those who participated in the disappearance of their relatives in the streets of their villages. The torturers who walk free in the streets. This kind of situation is traumatic for those affected. Crossing paths with someone who arrested their husband or son traumatises them all over again. Maybe this is one of the differences between the two searches of the past.[14]

As Galaz puts it later, the astronomers' search of the past doesn't disturb their sleep; in contrast, the women 'must find it hard to sleep after searching through human remains, looking for a past they are

unable to find'. For him, there is *no comparison* between the two ways of working with the past. Then he makes an interesting remark:

> What is strange is that society should understand these women better than it does astronomers. But the opposite is true. Society has a greater understanding of the astronomers, in their search for the past, than of these women who search for human remains.[15]

## The search for what remains

We see the women of Calama digging with their spades for the first time just over half-way through the film: diminutive figures against the vastness of the desert. The initial group of women grew to over one hundred at one point in the 1980s. Working with archaeologists, they learned how to comb the desert on their own.[16] Now down to very few, they continue to search. The archaeologists say they learned from them. In the film, Núñes describes how the women had found tiny fragments at one place in the desert; they turned out to be pieces of human bone. When they took archaeologists to the spot, there were signs that the soil had been disturbed. One of the women searching, Vicky Saavedra, picks some of these bone fragments from the ground as we watch. She holds four or five in the palm of her hand, and describes them to us, turning them over with her fingers. They are not more than a centimetre long and bright white, calcinated by the sun. Some are smooth and flat. These are from the outside of a thighbone or arm, she tells us. Others are thicker and porous: these come from the inside of a bone.

The next segment of the film is Saavedra's moving account of how the remains of her brother were found in the mass grave: a foot, still in its sock and shoe; fragments of his skull, with bullet holes; some teeth. She describes how she sat with her brother's foot for a long time, in shock, unable to think. In a television interview later, in 2013, which is not part of the film, she described how the grave was found:

> I remember that day very well, when we found the grave. The ground was completely dug up. I was walking over the ground and suddenly I stopped and looked and everywhere there were tiny pieces of bones. I couldn't move because I was afraid of

stepping on them and destroying what was left. I didn't under-
stand what had happened. I walked off to the side and I sat
down. The ditch was about this high and the bones were down
below. I sat down on the ledge, my feet were hanging down, and
then I cried for a long time.[17]

Back in the film, we see Núñes describing how the archaeologists
summoned to the site reconstructed what had happened: 'The bodies
of Calama were dug up with a machine. A machine that digs, with
five teeth.' He demonstrates with his hands. I am reminded of the
machines that were brought into Ground Zero in Manhattan in 2001
to speed up the clearing of the remains of the Twin Towers. I discussed
in Chapter 2 how this led to protests and the eventual removal of the
crane known as 'Big Red'. In the case of Calama, Núñes tells us, 'these
bodies were dug up on the orders of the military high command'. They
were to be taken elsewhere and dumped. We still don't know where
they were taken. But as the digger loaded the remains into trucks,
'fragments of skulls fell from the right side of the machine, and of feet,
from the left side'. He points out, anger in his voice:

> The truck had a driver. There were soldiers to unload the bodies.
> And, most importantly, the truck was part of a detachment,
> a division under military authority. It's up to the military to
> provide this information so that our friends from Calama can
> give their dead the burial they deserve.[18]

Another of the women of Calama, Violeta Berríos, then tells us how
she will go on searching. Her words echo those of Galaz earlier: 'I find
it hard to believe what I'm told. They taught me not to believe. It's
hard for me. Sometimes I feel like an idiot because I never stop asking
questions and nobody gives me the answers I want.' Though there
are echoes of the scientist's endless questioning earlier in the film,
the difference is stark. Someone *knows* the answers. Someone knows
what was done with the remains. But they won't come forward.

There is a pause, and the film shows us images once again of the
vast Atacama Desert. We return to Berríos. She says:

> I wish the telescopes didn't just look into the sky, but could also
> see through the earth so that we could find them. Like this …

[she gestures with her hands]. Then, a bit further on. We would sweep the desert with a telescope. Downwards. And give thanks to the stars for helping us find them. I'm just dreaming.

Guzmán leaves us there, at what for me is the culmination of the narrative, and moves on: the film takes us back to the astronomers and their dreams. But Berríos's vision is surely not just a dream. If the money that is spent on searching the sky, or even a part of that money, were to be spent on developing a technology for scanning the desert floor, might that dream not turn out to be practicable? In New York, after 9/11, money was no object in the attempts to identify the dead. A figure of US$80 million has been quoted as having been spent in phase one of that operation; the construction costs of the radio telescope were US$800 million, and running costs US$33 million.[19]

Back to the film, where the astronomers tell us that the calcium in our bones – or the bones that the women of Calama are searching for – is the same as the calcium in the stars, atoms made shortly after the time of the Big Bang. George Preston says this is what he tells people when he gives public lectures: 'We live among the trees; we also live among the stars; we live among the galaxies. We are part of the universe. The calcium in my bones was there from the beginning.' Does he suppose that people think the stars are made of some magic material unknown on earth? That we are not part of the universe? Guzmán shows us pictures of the stars, the surface of the moon, bones, and finally another sphere that reveals itself to be not the moon again but the top of a human skull, to document this similarity. Is this to be read as a source of comfort for the relatives who are searching for remains? Galaz has spoken much earlier in the film about how, if his parents or a brother or sister were lost, he would search for them among the galaxies, but he said this as a demonstration of how difficult the search is, not as a source of solace.

We go back to Núñes, who tells us, with passion, how we must not forget, but continue the search. While he speaks, we are shown archive footage of the excavation of a mass grave at Pisagüa in 1990. He is sure that one day we will find a trace of the disappeared. Berríos presents a harsher judgement:

It suits them that there are fewer and fewer of us women. Fewer problems. Because we are a problem. For society, for justice, for everyone. For them we are the lowest of the low. We are Chile's leprosy. That's what I think.

Again, Guzmán does not tarry here; he shows us some of Paula Allen's photographs of the Women of Calama, and names the many other groups of women searching.[20] The visual as he lists the names is once again the moving mechanism of the modern telescope. The women never cross paths with the astronomers, he tells us.

The final segments of the film seem to be Guzmán's attempt to make those paths cross. His final interview is with a young woman, Valentina Rodríguez, whose life seems to represent what he's looking for. She works for a leading astronomy organization, though not as an astronomer as far as we are told, and her parents were detained and disappeared when she was an infant. She tells the story of what happened: how her grandparents were detained when she was one year old; how they were threatened until they revealed where her parents were; how her grandparents brought her up. She continues:

Astronomy has somehow helped me to give another dimension to the pain, to the absence, to the loss. … I tell myself we are all part of a current, of an energy, a recyclable matter. Like the stars which must die so that other stars can be born, other planets, a new life. In this context, what happened to my parents and their absence takes on another dimension. It takes on another meaning and frees me a little from this great suffering, as I feel that nothing really comes to an end.

At the very end of the film, Guzmán arranges for Galaz to take Saavedra and Berríos inside an observatory and let them look at the sky through the telescope. The encounter is strangely moving – perhaps because in these sequences we see the two women enjoying the experience, and Galaz enjoying showing them a part of his world. At the beginning of the sequence, we hear again the echoing movement of the telescope as it manoeuvres into place. But Guzmán does not let us hear what is said; he does not ask what they made of it; he does not tell us at what point the visit took place or how it was arranged. The

cloud of stardust that appeared at the beginning of the film drifts over the images.

Finally, Guzmán shows us a cluster of marbles on a table. They reflect the pebbles collected by prehistoric inhabitants of the Atacama that he showed us shortly before. He tells us, 'I found in these marbles the innocence of the Chile of my childhood. Back then, each of us could carry the entire universe in the depths of our pockets.' He speaks of memory, and its 'gravitational force': 'Those who have a memory are able to live in the fragile present moment. Those who have none don't live anywhere.' The film ends with an image of the city of Santiago at night, 'each night, slowly, impassively, the centre of the galaxy passes over Santiago'. As David Martin-Jones puts it, 'the city becomes a star-scape, crystallizing with the universe'.[21]

## Disrupting from within

There is something wonderful about the way *Nostalgia for the Light* connects the cosmos with the struggles of Chile. It questions notions of past and present, animate and inanimate, and challenges such distinctions. Its focus on the Atacama Desert shows how the history of the universe can be read through the details of happenings in one small – or in this case, not so small – place on the earth's surface. It provides a chorography encompassing land, people and movement. It tackles questions of appearance and disappearance – and the impossibility of anything ever disappearing, as discussed in Chapter 7. Disappearance, like the existence of a present moment, is impossible. Traces always remain, even if only in the atoms that endure. These are important and challenging questions, questions that echo those that, as Galaz remarks, have 'always been at the core of our civilisations'.

And yet, in some profound way, it disappoints. Though many of its interlocutors do not do this – in fact they do quite the reverse – the film as a whole seems to me to elide or perhaps just sideline the very questions – those of justice – that demand more attention. Brad Epps argues that there is an 'aesthetic sublimity' in *Nostalgia for the Light* 'that at times comes close to overwhelming the horrors of economic exploitation and military oppression'.[22] I would go further. There is a contradiction, Javiera Barandiaran says, in examining the deep origins

of the universe in a country 'full of poverty and injustices'. For him, *Nostalgia for the Light* is a 'masterpiece' that captures this feeling of contradiction and asks, 'as a society, why do we dedicate so many resources to understand the distant past, when we know so little about our recent political and social history? Why study the stars, when the soil beneath holds so many secrets?'[23] However, although the questions may be posed, for me Guzmán's personal fascination with astronomy gets in the way of a fuller response.

The film focuses on what memory means. It becomes, according to Rob White, a 'calcification-like process whereby … abuses of power are gradually, numbingly accepted'.[24] Guzmán's preoccupation with memory becomes clear in his interview with White: 'I think that life is memory, everything is memory. There is no present time and everything in life is remembering.'[25] As Verne Harris puts it, 'Guzmán posits an absence of presence and an interminable play of multiple pasts.'[26]

However, memory on its own is not enough. The ghosts of the Atacama seem to demand justice. It is reminiscent of what Jacques Derrida calls hauntology, as opposed to ontology. Derrida reminds us that

> no justice … seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of war, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.[27]

The film's protagonists continually call attention to the question of justice. Núñes draws attention to indigenous peoples and nineteenth-century miners, and we are shown how the desert has preserved the remains of both. Placing these remains alongside the violence of disappearance, as Guzmán does, shows 'the circular, repeated cruelty of humanity', which Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera analyses as a Benjaminian move.[28] Guzmán sees the mummified bodies as objects belonging to universal culture, and his filming of them goes against indigenous peoples' demand to respect their ancestors.[29] However, he does not go beyond juxtaposition; he does not discuss either the

colonial decimation of earlier inhabitants of the Atacama region or the capitalist exploitation inherent in the mining industry.[30]

One of the women of Calama, Berríos, points out that what they need is telescopes that search the floor of the desert, not the sky, but again, Guzmán does not probe further. He lets Berríos's remark that she is just dreaming pass without challenge. He does not ask the astronomers what they think of the funding that enables them to do their work, and why that work should be funded, rather than the work of the women. Galaz remarks that society seems to accept the need for the astronomers but questions the women's search, yet the film fails to follow up on this thought. It shows us the telescopes in motion, their inexorable unfolding and the sounds that echo powerfully as they move, reflecting, for me at least, some external authority that is immovable and unapproachable: the Chilean state perhaps; the international system, even. It returns time and again to this movement and the sound – the modern world, its mechanisms and its instrumentalisation – but leaves it to the viewer to make of it what they will.

There is a history and political economy of astronomy in Chile. Barandiaran details this history and explores how establishing international observatories in Chile has maintained global and local hierarchies and a particular economy of dependency.[31] Foreign scientific interests take priority over those of Chilean astronomers, who are not generally consulted by the Chilean government, and observatories have significant tax exemptions. The environmental impact is not assessed. An observatory involves the creation of an artificial oasis, highways and huge base camps for employees. Electricity and water are provided, but with no attempt to co-ordinate with provision for neighbouring villages.[32]

Guzmán identifies two turning points in the film: the interview with Galaz, where he says that the present is a fine line, and the conversation with Núñes, where he juxtaposes archaeologists and astronomers who both are looking at the past.[33] As I discussed above, for me the pivot of the film is the point at which we turn from the scientists – archaeologists and astronomers – to activists, to 'the concrete search for the concrete – for bones and other palpable remains – that motivates the women in the desert'.[34] I don't think it a coincidence that the searchers in Guzmán's film are women, and the scientists, men. Epps notes that

there is 'a gendered division of labour adumbrated in [Guzmán's] very reference to "archaeologists, geologists, women and astronomers," in which the professional scientific researchers are overwhelmingly men and the "amateur searchers" are overwhelmingly women'. He regards this as an instance of 'a longstanding, ideologically laden division between reason and emotion'.[35] Nor is it a coincidence that the scientists are interviewed in their offices and the women either in the desert or in their kitchens.

Whatever Guzmán's intention – and Epps argues that he acknowledges the narrative authority and knowledge of the women – the effect is rather different. Even as they explain in detail the nature of the bone fragments found in the desert, or express a clear understanding of the political opposition they face, they are seen as part of the landscape, part of nature, part of the private sphere – not apart from it, in the neutral position of a scientific observer.[36] And what Guzmán surely fails to adequately acknowledge is the women's political stance and activism. His voice-over 'directs his audience to hear and see, think and feel, in certain romantically resonant ways'. It promotes a 'serene, even reposeful remembrance of things past', even when those things include the violence of exploitation, torture, imprisonment and death.[37]

Perhaps I am asking too much of a filmmaker. Perhaps, as Harris suggests, 'what Guzmán creates with this record of pain – this archive of feeling, this nostalgia for illumination and lightness – is a space offering multiple creative energies'.[38] Perhaps this is enough. Like Caroline Steedman, he draws attention to the immortality of dust: there is nowhere it can disappear to.[39] Like *Footprints of Memory*, he follows the traces left by women searching for bodies and justice.[40] Like Frayn's *Copenhagen*. he tells us there is no certainty, only ghosts, though he goes further: his ghosts do not disappear.[41] Perhaps, what he focuses on is a slow remaking of the world, step by step, and how 'the ordinary lives of the survivors continue after the tragedy'.[42] He offers us immortality: 'the discovery of atoms that are immortal, that are in us, that transform and don't die … well, it's eternal life'.[43] And he provides a perspective that moves beyond the human, embracing the universe as 'a heritage of universal matter that stretches back beyond human origins'.[44]

In view of the repression of memory in Chile, and the importance of documentary filmmaking in that context, perhaps all this is enough, or more than enough. Kaitlin Murphy argues that '*Nostalgia for the Light* studies time, space and matter, but by focusing on the very materiality of the historical event and its after effects, they in turn *produce* and create new intersections among time, space and matter'.[45] She reminds us of Jacques Rancière's notion of 'a suitable political work of art', one that works by 'disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable'.[46] The film, then, doesn't just show us evidence and present information, as other forms of documentary do. Instead, it induces new ways of seeing, and as such, can be seen as a politics, in Rancière's terms.

Ruiz-Poveda invites us to consider *Nostalgia for the Light*, alongside Walter Benjamin's understanding of history, where 'the traumatic past can only be redeemed and recovered through a messianic exercise of memory'.[47] She concedes that drawing parallels between the universe and victims could bypass action, but she argues that 'the metaphysical and the political productively co-exist' in the film.[48] She reminds us of what Benjamin says about Paul Klee's angel of history:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. … This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. [49]

What is necessary is a pause, to stop the progress of history and enable reflection on the past, in what Benjamin calls now-time, a present that 'comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation'.[50] Ruiz-Poveda argues that 'the contradictory nature of time and history presented in *Nostalgia for the Light* only makes sense with a Benjaminian understanding of the *now-time* in which all moments in history exist simultaneously'.[51] Through this approach, the film can be seen as a call to its spectators for action: 'the film points at the impossibility of moving forward unless amends are made, making

everyone responsible for the sustainable unfolding of the collective present'.[52]

The past does not go away. It is the present that can disappear, as Galaz says, in 'a puff of air'. The material persistence and coexistence of the past, evoked so convincingly in the film's chorography, challenges a perception of the world that argues for moving on, turning the page, burying the past – the view promoted by a government, and a politics that insists that forgetting is possible. We see the world differently and political possibility is reanimated. The linearity of time is questioned. If memory is central to life, if 'those who have none don't live anywhere', as Guzmán tells us at the end of the film, then we cannot escape. The stars are watching, the film reminds us. Those responsible, those that refuse memory, are being kept under observation, their movements monitored by an unforgiving universe. Re-visioning the world is a politics, and therefore also, perhaps, a demand for justice.

## Notes

1   I thank Danielle House for introducing me to the film and for her comments on an earlier version of the chapter.
2   Haden Guest and Eduardo Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera: An Interview with Patricio Guzmán.' *Cineaste* (Summer 2011): 20–5; 22.
3   *Nostalgia for the Light*. Directed by Patricio Guzmán (Spanish with English subtitles), 90 minutes. New Wave Films, 2010. Quotations from the film are from the subtitles by Katie Henfrey.
4   *Nostalgia for the Light*. Unless indicated otherwise, subsequent quotations in this chapter are from the film subtitles.
5   Chris Marker, *La Jetée: ciné roman*. New York: Zone Books, 1992; no page numbers.
6   Patricio Guzmán, 'What I owe to Chris Marker.' *Sight and Sound Magazine*, 13 February 2015. BFI http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/what-i-owe-chris-marker.
7   Mike Pearson, *'In Comes I': Performance, Memory and Landscape*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006: 4.
8   Pearson, *'In Comes I'*, 9.
9   Pearson, *'In Comes I'*, 12.
10  Mike Pearson, *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2015.
11  Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 21. Original emphasis.
12  Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 24.

13  *Nostalgia for the Light*, 17:22 mins.

14  *Nostalgia for the Light*, 45:52 mins.

15  *Nostalgia for the Light*, 49:30 mins.

16  Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 21. See also Paula Allen, *Flowers in the Desert: The Search for Chile's Disappeared*, 2nd ed. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. The group is known as the Women of Calama, though Guzmán does not use this name.

17  The Laura Flanders Show, 'Chilean Women Seek Justice 40 Years after Coup.' Interview with Paula Allen and Victoria Saavedra González, 18 October 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9EB0byb_bA. A report in a local paper in 2014 sheds doubt on the identification of the remains returned to Saavedra (Caravana de la Muerte: ninguno de los restos periciados corresponde a José Saavedra González, *El Mercurio de Calama*, 11 April. http://www.soychile.cl/Calama/Sociedad/2014/04/11/242332/Caravana-de-la-Muerte-ninguno-de-los-restos-periciados-corresponde-a-Jose-Saavedra-González.aspx).

18  *Nostalgia for the Light*, 58:20 mins.

19  Shiya Ribowsky and Tom Shachtman, *Dead Center: Behind the Scenes at the World's Largest Medical Examiner's Office*. New York: Harper, 2007: 237; Javiera Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars? Astronomy and Growth in Chile.' *Minerva* 53 (2015): 141–64; 149.

20  Allen, *Flowers in the Desert*.

21  David Martin-Jones, 'Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric "Universe Memory".' *Third Text* 27, no. 6 (2013): 707–22; 715.

22  Brad Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones: Memory, Emotion, and Pedagogy in Patricio Guzmán's Chile, La Memoria Obstinada and Nostalgia De La Luz.' *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13, (2016). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1229661. For other discussions of *Nostalgia for the Light,* see, for example, Patrick Blaine, 'Representing Absences in the Postdictatorial Documentary Cinema of Patricio Guzmán.' *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 1 (2013): 114–30; Nilo Couret, 'Scale as Nostalgic Form: Patricio Guzmán's Nostalgia for the Light (2011).' *Discourse* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 67–91; Macarena Gómez-Barris, 'Atacama Remains and Post Memory.' *Media Fields Journal* 5 (2012). http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/atacama-remains-and-post-memor/.

23  Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars?', 144.

24  Rob White, 'After-Effects: Interview with Patricio Guzmán.' *Film Quarterly*, 12 July 2012. https://filmquarterly.org/2012/07/12/after-effects-interview-with-patricio-guzman/.

25  White, 'After-Effects' .

26  Verne Harris, 'Antonyms of Our Remembering.' *Archival Science* 14, no. 3–4 (2014): 215–29.

27  Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf.

London: Routledge, 1994: xix. Quoted in Harris, 'Antonyms of Our Remembering.'

28  Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Anywhere": Historical Redemption in Patricio Guzmán's Nostalgia for the Light (2010).' *Journal of Religion & Film* 21, no. 2 (2017): 17–18. http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss2/19.

29  Guest and Ledesma, 'Ad Astra Per Aspera', 23.

30  Of course, there are choices to be made, and Guzmán explores the stories of indigenous inhabitants in another film *The Pearl Button* (2015): Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones'.

31  Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars?'

32  Barandiaran, 'Reaching for the Stars?', 153.

33  Chris Darke, 'Desert of the Disappeared: Patricio Guzmán on Nostalgia for the Light.' *Sight & Sound Magazine*, August 2012. http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/desert-disappeared-patricio-guzman-nostalgia-light.

34  Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones', 14.

35  Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones', 13. Epps is quoting Guzmán's words in the Guest and Ledesma interview 'Ad Astra Per Aspera' here.

36  See Martin-Jones's discussion of how Berríos 'blends with the landscape', seeming to give voice to it (Martin-Jones, 'Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric "Universe Memory"', 717–18).

37  Epps, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Bones', 7.

38  Harris, 'Antonyms of Our Remembering.'

39  Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

40  Mariana Rivera García, 'Huellas Para La Memoria/Footprints of Memory.' Vimeo, 8 minutes, 2017. https://vimeo.com/203656930.

41  Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998.

42  Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Anywhere"': 15; for making and unmaking the world, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

43  Chris Darke, 'Desert of the Disappeared'.

44  Martin-Jones, 'Archival Landscapes and a Non-Anthropocentric "Universe Memory"', 707.

45  For a summary of this context, see Kaitlin M. Murphy, 'Remembering in Ruins: Touching, Seeing and Feeling the Past in Nostalgia De La Luz/Nostalgia for the Light ([2010] 2011).' *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas* 13, no. 3 (2016): 265–81.

46  Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004: 63.

47  Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Anywhere"', 4.

48  Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Any-where"', 5.

49  Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006: 392, quoted in Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Anywhere"', 18. Original emphasis.

50  Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin,* 396, quoted in Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Anywher"', 19.

51  Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Any-where"', 23.

52  Ruiz-Poveda Vera, '"Those Who Don't Remember Don't Exist Any-where"', 26.

# 9

# The Grenfell Tower fire[1]

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

<div align="right">– Lauren Berlant[2]</div>

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. Traumatised. Mesmerised 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

1  My thanks to Dan Bulley for his comments on an earlier version, and Robbie Shilliam for very insightful conversations.

2  Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011: 10.

3  Nazanin Aklani, interview with James O'Brian, BBC *Newsnight*, 12 July 2017. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08y683z.

4  I discuss 9/11 in more detail in Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

5  Grenfell Action Group, KCTMO – Playing with Fire. December 2016. https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/amp/.

6  Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins and Nadine El-Enany. eds, *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*. London: Pluto Press, 2019.

7  Tiina Vaittinen, 'The Global Biopolitical Economy of Needs: Transnational Entanglements between Ageing Finland and the Global

Nurse Reserve of the Philippines.' *TAPRI Studies in Peace and Conflict Research* 103 (2017): 28.

8   Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 2. I am grateful to Tiina Vaittinen for introducing me to this term.

9   Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

10   Amrita Rangasami, 'Failure of Exchange Entitlements Theory of Famine 1.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 41 (1985): 1747–52; Amrita Rangasami, 'Failure of Exchange Entitlements Theory of Famine 2.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 42 (1985): 1797–801.

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# 10

# From one world to another

*Changing class is like emigrating from one side of the world to the other, where you have to rescind your passport, learn a new language and make gargantuan efforts if you are not to lose touch completely with the people and habits of your old life.*

– Lynsey Hanley[1]

It is time to write again about my own experience. The book began with an essay written in response to a request from Naeem Inayatullah at a dinner after his talk in Aberystwyth in March 2007, and it was first published in 2011. Recently, my PhD student Amal Abu-Bakare surprised me. She'd read the essay and wanted to tell me how much she'd liked it. She compared my writing to that of Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his *Between the World and Me*, a book I had yet to read.[2] Amal identifies herself as a black Muslim feminist; she is working to unravel the complexities of racialisation, in particular the racialisation of religion, implicated in counter-terrorism in Canada, where she's from, and the UK.

Her comments prompted me to go back and reread my own essay. I'm no longer the same person who wrote that essay, ten years ago, and many of its concerns seem very remote now. However, some remain, and some are sharpened. The writing of that essay – and what has happened since – has changed me, changed my teaching and writing, and changed my sense of what motivates me.

The original essay was hard to write. At first it was difficult – impossible – to begin. It was only when my mother showed me the letter my father wrote to her after my brother's birth – described in the final paragraph of that essay – that I could start. And it was only

Naeem's gentle but quietly persistent prompting that enabled me to continue, that opened out the writing, and that turned it into the essay that was published. The beginnings can be traced back further, to an International Studies Association (ISA) conference in San Diego, California in March 2006. I attended the session where Himadeep Muppidi read his essay 'Shame and rage'.[3] I did not know him then, and I've no idea what I expected, but his reading so moved me that I had to leave the session. I walked from the conference room through car parks and away towards the concrete shopping malls behind the hotel. Eventually I turned around, retraced my steps and went back into the session. I did not belong there, in that room – and yet I did. I was interpellated at one and the same time as white coloniser, responsible for the wretchedness of the earth, and as exploited outsider to my place in the world in my own right. When, much later, I told Naeem I didn't have a story to tell, he quietly insisted we all do. He is right, of course. Our stories are not our own, in any case.

In November 2008, I read my essay to an assembled audience of my colleagues and students in Aberystwyth. It was my inaugural lecture, and as tradition dictates – and as I wanted – I had invited family and friends. My mother Joan was there, and my godmother: my mother's cousin, Marjorie – daughter of the Annie who married a Catholic mentioned in my essay. In deference to my mother, I left out much of the description of my father's death. Both she and my godmother had travelled from Lytham St Annes to be in the audience. My other godmother, my mother's best friend from school, Joyce Garner, declined the invitation. Joyce had married my mother's cousin, Edwin, and they began married life in a caravan, I think, though she, unlike my mother, had been to secondary school. She now lived in a large detached house with indoor swimming pool, conservatory and carefully tended front garden overlooking the Royal Lytham golf course. She was not well enough to come – and also, always witty and down-to-earth, couldn't see the point.

When I was told I had to do an inaugural lecture, I had chosen to read the essay, first, because it was something I had written already, and second, because of my colleague Len Scott, whose inaugural was held the year before mine. He had commented, when I was given my Chair, that it had only taken eighty-five years for the department

to appoint a female professor. He had given an amazing inaugural lecture interweaving family, academic thinking, anecdotes and wit in a way that only he can pull off. Maybe that was what made it possible for me to do something entirely auto-ethnographic: there was no way I could attempt what he had done, and yet he had opened the door for something other than the expected academic setting-out of a new professor's research agenda. I had no idea what to expect in response to my essay – but then, tradition dictates that inaugurals are not followed by questions anyway, so I would be safe.

What happened afterwards surprised me. In the reception following the lecture, a group of women PhDs surrounded me, saying how pleased they were that I'd done what I'd just done: they felt emboldened to do something similar. An old friend summarised the argument I'd made in a couple of sentences – although to others it was just a story. And in the days afterwards a colleague sent me a thank-you note and small gift, telling me that my talk had resonated deeply with her, and her relation to her own father. Others responded with their stories. After a while I forgot that I'd written this personal account, and that it was published – I was surprised when, if I said something about my background, people would say, 'Oh yes, I know.' Now that no longer happens: no one reads the story any more. That's one reason why I was surprised when Amal gave me her comments.

My godmother Marjorie responded differently. Although she never said anything to my face, my mother told me that she was angry: she thought I shouldn't have done what I did. These things were private, and shouldn't be revealed in public. Respectability was all. My mother was more forgiving: 'It's your story, and that's fine.' Much later, she pointed out inaccuracies: she was the one who'd chosen the presents my father gave to his staff every Christmas; the shortage of housekeeping money was not because of payments to my father's ex-wife but because my mother had said she could manage on less so that they could afford to move me from the local primary to a direct-grant school, where, at the age of eleven, I won a governor's scholarship. In fact she denied there had ever been any maintenance payments, although I have the evidence myself in official documents. I had seen the contents of my father's black box with my own eyes too, though I was never able to bring myself to admit this to her.

I had not thought of my earlier essay as anything to do with class. But as Lynsey Hanley puts it, changing class can be compared with emigrating: it is disorientating and isolating. Migrants are left cut off from those they were close to in their previous life, and there is no going back. A new language has to be assimilated, new habits learned. I've only just come to realise the impact of crossing class: on relationships put at risk, on security lost, and on writing and research choices. My secret as an academic is not just that I was originally a physicist not a sociologist, but rather that I carry within me a still raw sense of injustice from the traces of another life – and not just my own. I travelled from a suburban council-house upbringing in Bristol to sherry parties hosted by Oxford dons.[4] But my father was already middle class, I suppose. He wasn't a graduate – a lack that held him back throughout his career – but he took the opportunity that was offered to train as a teacher when he was demobbed after the Second World War. He was a head teacher by the time I started school. I still recognise much in Séan Richardson's blog about being a working-class PhD, from the 'imposter syndrome' and 'anxiety about not knowing the right cues or having the correct etiquette', to 'not being able to articulate exactly what you do' to your family.[5] What Hanley doesn't mention is that crossing class boundaries distances a person from their children, too: the second generation inhabits the new class with no difficulty.

My mother is the one who really made that journey – and managed to keep her feet in both camps.[6] She was born in Diggle in Saddleworth on Christmas Eve 1922. Her father's family lived close to the docks in Salford where he worked as a cotton packer before the war. After he was gassed in the trenches, the family moved out of Salford to the clearer air of the surrounding hills, where he could breathe better. But he died when Joan, his only child, was just two and a half. He is buried in an unmarked plot in Weaste Cemetery, a stone's throw from the Manchester Ship Canal and Old Trafford football ground. His widow and her infant moved back to St Annes to be with the extended family, including Joan's cousins Marjorie, Peter, Bob and Pauline. To Joan they were like brothers and sisters. As a child, Joan was taken back to Salford to visit her father's mother – a formidable woman by all accounts – and her cousin Edwin. When I was young we would

still visit her aunt and uncle in Salford and go for a walk in Buile Hill Park. I can remember vividly having tea in their narrow house, with its staircase leading up from a cupboard in the front room, and the drive from there to the park on the hill. My great uncle used to press a coin into my palm as we left. Those houses are all gone now, demolished to make way for the motorway, but the cemetery is still there.

My mother's first job after leaving school at 14 was as an apprentice carpet layer, but illness forced her to give that up. At 16 she went to work at the Meter Record Office – where she met my father, a meter reader – and from there to the railway station booking office and then the tax office. When she was first married and expecting me, the couple lived in her mother's small terraced house in Holmfield Road, St Annes. In 1950 my father took a job as a teacher in Bristol and they moved down south. A few years later they moved again, this time to Darlington, where their second child, a son, was born. But they were soon back in Bristol. My father was now a head teacher, and they settled in a council house in Westbury-on-Trym.

My mother was a traditional housewife: bringing us up and looking after her husband, her mother-in-law and her own mother. In those days women whose husbands needed to demonstrate their middle class-ness weren't allowed to work. But as soon as we were grown, she trained as a lecturer and taught in a technical college. She took early retirement shortly after my father retired. Five years later, he died suddenly: a story I told in the first chapter. My mother stayed in Bristol, busy in various ways: studying fine-art embroidery, training advanced driving assessors, baking and serving on committees for the Women's Institute. Then, in the early 2000s, as her Bristol friends began dying out, she moved back to Lytham St Annes. She immediately became, once again, part of two vastly different circles. Her cousin Marjorie's ex-council house was a regular calling point for a chat, with Pauline a few steps round the corner and Bob not far away. And she was taken out to lunch and on day trips with her old school friend Joyce and her daughter. The two circles overlapped rather uncomfortably: Marjorie was Joyce's cleaning lady.

The first essay in this book is 'about' my father. This story is about my mother. Or rather, it is about the distance between me and my mother: a metaphorical rather than a literal distance. It is the

distance between a mother who left school at fourteen and from then on had no belief in her own considerable abilities and a daughter who has always been told she was able. It is the distance between a mother whose own mother was one of the housekeeping staff in a hotel and a daughter who stays in hideous conference hotels at international studies conventions in the USA every year, without a second thought. It is the distance between a mother who has pride in her daughter's achievements and a daughter who sees how little she has achieved in the face of the injustices of the world and is impatient with that praise: a mother who expresses her pride and a daughter who cannot bear to be singled out for attention or praise. And it is the distance between a daughter who steers clear of a mother who cannot understand what she works on and a daughter who cannot suppress the impatience she feels with a mother who will not even read a newspaper or a novel or use her considerable intellectual abilities at all.

Almost exactly a year before she died, I wrote, 'I cannot tell my mother's story – and I cannot talk to her about it.' I understood something of why when Lauren Berlant, during a conversation on the train after a conference in Salford, recommended I read Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, a meditation on questions of class and belonging, materiality and loss. I first heard Berlant speak when I was two years out of my PhD and only just beginning to work on trauma. I went to a conference on Testimonial Cultures organised by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey in May 1999 in Lancaster.[7] I was keen to hear one of the speakers in particular: Cathy Caruth. She gave the paper that I quote in Chapter 7.[8] Berlant spoke in Lancaster too, presenting work from *Cruel Optimism*, the book I draw on in Chapter 9. I next met her at a Trauma Workshop held at the University of Salford four years later.

After the workshop, we both took the train north. Berlant was on her way back to Lancaster and I was on my way to Lytham St Annes to call on my mother, who was in the process of moving back to Lancashire from Bristol. We must have fallen to talking about the often fraught relationship between mothers and daughters. Berlant must have sensed more about me than I said; she asked whether I'd read *Landscape for a Good Woman*.[9] I hadn't, but I did immediately

afterwards. The conversation made connections for me that I hadn't made before at all, about the personal promptings for the work on trauma I had been doing. Steedman's book relates to my background in many ways: Berlant put her finger on something very precisely with that suggestion. I wrote to her, 'I think I keep trying to repress the insights from what you said … and at the same time looking for a way to bring such concerns more into my work.' Maybe, in this book, I am finally attempting something like this.

Steedman talks about 'lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don't quite work'.[10] For all lives to some extent, but for these lives particularly, 'specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with'. Her mother was very much like mine: 'From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood she came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn't.'[11] Though my grandmother was the one who worked in the Lancashire mills as a girl, this account helped me grasp some of the contradictions I felt in my mother.

She read my books – or rather, started to read some of them. After her death these books came back to me. The three of them died together: Marjorie, Joan and Joyce. In the space of one year I lost my mother and my two godmothers. My two other role models and confidantes, my mother-in-law and my stepmother-in-law, had both died many years before, in the early 1990s.

I have always found in Frantz Fanon's writing, and particularly *Black Skin, White Masks*, something that spoke to me at a profound level.[12] His work provided the epigraph and inspiration for Chapter 1, 'Objects among objects', and the book, and Isaac Julien's film, have always been the first texts in my postcolonial politics syllabus. Fanon was from a middle-class family that could afford to send him to a good school. And he was black. I am neither.

Class is a form of racialisation. Not in any sense as brutal as other forms, for sure, but, like race and gender, class defines, separates and excludes. It draws lines. It cannot be likened to the racism Coates recounts.[13] Nor can moving from one class to another be compared with other, more dislocating and dangerous journeys. But it does give some sense of what those other, greater dislocations and vulnerabilities might feel like. Class origin can be, and often is, hidden.

On the surface it is perfectly possible to pass as from another class background. Expressions, ways of dressing, manners and mannerisms can all be acquired, often unconsciously, such that one can only be 'outed' by someone else from the same roots. But discomfort and dislocation persist. Perhaps, even, as Naeem Inayatullah has suggested to me, because class is less visible, it is less accessible than other forms of difference, and hence – and this is my interpretation – more difficult to acknowledge and contest.[14] Maybe they work together; maybe, as Gurminda Bhambra and John Holdwood put it, 'class is race, and addressing their mutual formation will be central to any future organisation for social justice'.[15]

For Robbie Shilliam 'race' is 'the hierarchical adjudication of human competencies through the categorizing of group attributes, wherein groups are identified by some kind of shared heritage that is deemed visually identifiable'.[16] For me, this does make class more or less a racial category. Richard Dyer says in *White: Essays on Race and Culture* that 'the myriad minute decisions that constitute the practice of the world are at every point informed by judgments about people's capacity and worth, judgments based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgments'.[17]

People's class is judged in precisely this way: by their appearance, what neighborhood they're from, their accent, and what they call their meals. Lynsey Hanley writes:

> I can't remember the day I started calling dinner 'lunch' and tea 'dinner', but I know that it happened, because that's what I call them now. That must mean I'm middle class, where once I was working class.[18]

Most people I meet these days have no idea what sort of meal tea was when I was a child: bread and butter always, a pot of tea of course, and something hot like scrambled eggs or baked beans or cheese on toast, and maybe a sweet, too (we didn't call it 'a pudding' or 'a dessert'): tinned peaches, perhaps, or a home-made sponge cake. I find I cannot remember the details, and I'm not sure I could still set the table for it, though that used to be my job – alongside carefully buttering the bread, cutting it into triangles and setting it out in neatly

overlapping rows on a large plate. I am almost ashamed to admit to this knowledge, in print.

Kenan Malik argues that 'race developed initially as a response to class differences within European society'.[19] He writes:

> Today, the concept of race is so intertwined with the idea of 'colour' that it is often difficult to comprehend the Victorian notion of race. For the Victorians, race was a description of social distinction, not of colour differences. Indeed, the view of non-Europeans as an inferior race was but an extension of the already existing view of the working class at home and took a considerable time to be established as the normative view.[20]

The working class was not only socially, economically and culturally distinct; to the Victorians, those distinctions were biological and inherited, passed from generation to generation. Whereas in the 1960s, social policy was aimed at overcoming those differences, by the 1990s both New Labour and the conservatives in the UK built policies around the notion, Malik argues, that these differences (and the resulting inequality) were natural and could not be overcome. Although Malik claims that 'today, elite views of the working class are rarely racialized, at least in an overt fashion', covert discrimination remains.[21]

One of the outcomes of a social or political order based on such divisions (and gender must be included here) is that people are objectified: they become 'an object in the midst of other objects'.[22] It is no longer the unique and irreplaceable being – the '*qui*' – that is seen, but only the '*quoi*'.[23] We no longer see *who* people are, but only *what* they are. Lines are drawn and a particular form of power, authority and control is established. People are interpellated into subjects, that is, objects.

Coates's book begins with searing accounts of his childhood and youth. Though vulnerable, as any young girl was, to sexual abuse, I have never experienced anything remotely comparable to the fear and violence he describes. The council house I was brought up in was not on an estate, but in a 1930s suburb, surrounded by middle-class, owner-occupied, semi-detached houses. I was moved away from the boys' taunting at the local primary when I was seven. I attended

an all-girls school and then an Oxford women's college. About to graduate, and be thrown back out into the world, I went to the university's careers office. The cyclostyled sheets I was handed describing the various openings available would often state, baldly, at the top: 'Women need not apply'. This was 1970, before the UK's Sex Discrimination Act came into force, outlawing such practices. Suddenly, at a stroke, unexpectedly, my privilege was withdrawn. I had seen myself as 'a universal subject' but I discovered I was 'one upon whom the universe had closed its doors'.[24] The body I inhabited was not good enough, though middle class by then it surely was. It still isn't, of course: less than twenty-five per cent of professors are women, and there is a significant pay gap.

Coates describes how he came to think of being black as not to do particularly with skin colour:

> Perhaps there had been other bodies, mocked, terrorized, and insecure. Perhaps the Irish too had once lost their bodies. Perhaps being named 'black' had nothing to do with any of this; perhaps being named 'black' was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah.[25]

Closer to home for me, Carolyn Steedman reflects on her enduring consciousness of class difference:

> I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't.[26]

As Lynsey Hanley puts it, moving from one class to another is a journey from one world to another. It entails loss as well as anything positive, and it leaves one's inevitable incoherence and incompleteness palpable. In a way, then, so-called social mobility is similar to being 'almost the same, but not white'.[27] One dons a mask and builds a self, but one that remains always fragile and vulnerable, subject to unmasking at any moment. The new self is often unaware of its fragility, until interpellated otherwise: 'Look, a Negro'.[28]

An awareness of the vulnerability and multiplicity of the self is not necessarily a bad thing. All 'selves' are vulnerable – or, as I've put

it elsewhere, 'missing'.[29] The self – the 'individual' of contemporary politics – is a comforting fantasy, nothing more. Some people are blissfully oblivious of this fact, as Steedman points out: an ignorance that goes along with privilege. Although invited to the party – interpellated as a middle-class liberal subject – she is aware that this is not all she is, or maybe even not who she is. We can assume that she goes along with it all, chatting to the woman she meets. But all the while she 'quite deliberately' maintains a distance, one visible only to herself, but one that enables her to preserve the complicated, incoherent person she recognises herself to be, in the face of attempts to interpellate her as a coherent 'subject'. She refuses to misrecognise herself as 'like' the other woman, but she shows up at the party anyway.

Interpellation is the process of 'hailing' whereby 'concrete individuals' are transformed into subjects. Louis Althusser's famous example is the 'Hey, you there!' uttered by a policeman.[30] When we recognise ourselves in the officer's call and turn round, we are interpellated into a particular subject position: we become subjects of the police order, in Jacques Rancière's terms.[31] Interpellation 'establishes and cements authority and social norms', but according to James Martel it does more, 'establishing even the sense of individual identity'.[32] A person becomes a *subject* – and an individual – 'by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion'.[33] And yet, interpellation doesn't quite work: there is always a leftover: we are always both more that the subject we are hailed to be, and less. We never quite fit. In the Lacanian thinking that Althusser draws on, interpellation positions us in the social or symbolic order, but that order is always incomplete. There is always a lack – a surplus or an excess – that the symbolic cannot capture.

Not only is the person who turns around sometimes not the intended subject of the call, as Althusser admits, but interpellation always fails: we are all misinterpellated subjects, as Martel puts it. His book makes what for me are two crucial arguments. First, he points out that if the person who turns up – or turns around – is not the one to whom the call was addressed, it can be world-shattering. For example, he sees the Haitian revolution as a response to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen – a call taken up by Haitian slaves, though it was never addressed to them – which then fed back into France,

radicalising what happened there. Misinterpellation, in other words, 'works as a specifically and dangerously political force'.[34] It holds a radical potential that can help 'rethink or enhance our approach to politics, to authority, and even to revolution'.[35]

Second, he links interpellation with colonisation. It means imposing an identity on persons, overwriting their multiplicity and violently incorporating them into an alien way of being. We are all interpellated, and answering to that interpellation – accepting the identity to which we are called – is accepting a colonising move. Decolonisation 'is waged against interpellation itself'. Martel sees Fanon as 'the misinterpellated subject par excellence', in that he 'takes on the responsibility of deciding for himself what his blackness is and means, and in that way he both refuses and stands in his given subject position'. Decolonisation involves accepting 'the subordinate subject position [we are] forced into and [turning] it against the very submission it is meant to instill'.[36] The North Kensington community could be seen as doing precisely this in the aftermath of Grenfell. Misinterpellation calls into question the whole process of subject formation and 'is ultimately a challenge above all to capitalism itself, as well as the ideology of individualism that sustains it'.[37] The task, as Martel sees it, is to figure out how to amplify the damage – to refuse and resist interpellation and the colonised subject it produces – and how to build other ways of calling each other and a community into being. Accepting interpellation is of course easier and more comforting since it gives us the fantasy of belonging, but that fantasy is fragile.

Those who cross the class divide are misinterpellated subjects: we respond to the call to be intellectuals, leaders, theorists, despite the fact that we recognise all too clearly that the call is not addressed to us but to the middle or upper classes. But if, when we become middle class, we take on middle-class ways of thinking and acting and espouse middle-class values, the misinterpellation is no longer resistance in Martel's sense. We have merely swelled the ranks of the oppressors and buttressed the barrier we so recently crossed. If, as academics, we conceal our origins, adopt established pedagogical and writing styles, and focus on our careers, we might be able to conceal our anxiety, overcome our impostor syndrome, and blend in. But any critical advantage that our complex background and

our dislocation might afford us will have been lost. We will be no better placed than the next person to decipher the contradictions of authority or resist the decimation of education. We will repeat the acts of the colonisers.

The alternative, following Martel's discussion of Fanon, is decolonisation: refusing the framework of interpellation and the production of subjectivity, and working to reveal alternative forms of personhood. It involves becoming someone who quite deliberately remembers where she came from and what this means for her encounters now. In a sense the misinterpellated subject is one who has traversed the fantasy in the Lacanian sense, one who no longer accepts the comfort of a knowable and securable world but recognises the impossibility of completeness or closure.[38] The misinterpellated subject is not a 'subject' at all but a person, or what I have called a person-as-such, and a person resists objectification and instrumentalisation. A person is the *qui* not the *quoi*, the neighbour not the biopolitical subject.[39] In pedagogical terms, the alternative is difficult and yet vital: education is at the heart of the project of interpellation that produces future docile citizen-subjects. Nevertheless, we can begin from the assumption, following Martel's assertion that we are all misinterpellated, that our students already know what is going on.

My mother's death, and her way of dying, showed me many things. Her wisdom, first and foremost. I found that although I had continually been trying to convince her that her intelligence was equal to that of any academic, in my thinking she was still lacking – in education, in reading, and so on. I had always known she was an agile thinker – seeking advice but not taking it, working in sometimes oblique or even underhand ways to get the outcome she wanted. But I had not realised the extent of her fundamental wisdom. How I wish I had grasped this before, when she was still in this world. She embraced forms of knowing that do not come from books. Hers was an embodied, situated knowledge. She was perceptive, knew how to control from beneath, and how to support with understanding and insight. She had a strong sense of rightness, and was willing to stand up to authority. Working in the ticket office in St Annes Station, she was approached one day by the man who owned the railway, who demanded to travel without buying a ticket. She demurred. 'You

know who I am', he insisted. She stood firm, and he paid his fare like everyone else.

It also showed me something else. Towards the end of my earlier essay, I wrote: 'I am my father's daughter, nothing more, despite any feeling of having made my own route in the world.' I now think that I am also, in a perhaps more profound or at least more embodied sense, nothing more than another incarnation of my mother, though without her wisdom. I don't know why I should be surprised by this, although it is obvious from the story so far.

In the course of less than six months, through a sorry saga of hospitalisation, poor treatment and missed chances, my mother went from an active, busy, independent woman to a mere shadow of herself physically. She must have had some intimation of this, though. Over the summer we'd had a conversation about wills and funeral arrangements, even down to the hymns she would like: 'God be in my heart' and 'Morning has broken'.

Summoned to the hospital one bleak day in March, we watched at her bedside. We were told she wouldn't last through the night, but she did. At around 1 a.m. my brother and his partner left. I promised to contact them if there was any change. I focused all through the night on her face and her breathing. Steady, regular, uninterrupted. Then, at 8.30 in the morning, as the nurses arrived to turn her, the breathing stopped. There was a long pause. Then she took a breath: smooth, unforced. Then another long pause. Then another breath, again, not laboured or difficult. Then nothing. Her heartbeat continued for some moments. And then it too stopped. After a while the young nurse who had stayed at my request left, and I went back to the chair I had been sitting in. At that point, the grey March dawn outside the window opened into rays of sunshine that entered the room. Morning had truly broken.

The following day, I woke and looked in the mirror. She looked back at me. My face was her face. She was there still in me. I carry her with me always. One person inside another, or one world still alive in another one.

Politics – and international politics especially – makes us who we are, and regulates the ways we inhabit the world, and our journeys through it: across class boundaries, across continents, from life to

death. The distinctions, inequalities and hierarchies that are imposed by and on us determine the ease or otherwise of that habitation and those journeys.

During an interlude in her hospitalisation, my mother was moved to what was described on its website as 'a community unit that provides sub-acute and fast-stream inpatient and day hospital care for older people', whatever that means. Things promised on that same website were not available in reality. When I visited, I would travel by train, talking the bus from St Annes train station and then returning by walking on to the station one stop further down the line at Ansdell. Conditions in the 'unit' were appalling: food she couldn't eat, a tiny television she couldn't see, a 'day room' with patients parked unattended for hours on end, and a constant wailing from the ward's dementia patients. After my visits, I would escape to the world outside, and walk to the station. The short distance took me past large detached mock-Tudor houses, set well back from the road, with closely manicured gardens and spacious drives. I wept at the transition from public squalor to private excess.

In the end my mother could no longer put up with it. Her one aim was to get out of hospital, and she found the only way to do that. Four days before she died she had me write in a thank-you card to some friends: 'I hope to be out of hospital very soon.' She couldn't make her fingers sign her name.

While Stuart Hall's classes in sociology and social theory enabled me to see much that I had been blind to before – it was a revelation, as I wrote in Chapter 1 – entering the discipline of international relations in 1993 required me to forget most of what I had learned. I was expected to enter a world where 'nations' or 'states' spoke with one voice and no history, where there were 'agents' and 'structures', and where identities might be 'multiple' but were still 'constructed' – a self-referential world, circulating around itself, defined by the concept of 'the international'. As Marysia Zalewski put it, there were 'all these theories and yet the bodies keep piling up'.[40] It was only much later that dissenting voices from the margins became truly audible, and the discipline was outed as a veritable 'world school of colonialism'.[41]

The idea of decolonising the discipline has now become the latest of a series of 'turns', alongside, among so many others, the 'narrative

turn' and the 'aesthetic turn'. While these 'turns' have opened thinking space, in my view as long as there remains the idea that a discipline of international relations is possible, thought will remain confined within the boundaries of the world as we think we know it. Or rather trapped within the borders of a particular, racist, classist and gendered world sustained by the concepts and theories destined – and designed – to reproduce it.

There is no place in that world for the people we encounter every day: irreplaceable, contradictory, unfathomable beings, whose stories testify to another world and another way of being. These people exist: they are not part of some future utopia. It's just that we are blind to them: we cannot see them; they do not fit our theories. Indeed, 'theory' itself cannot grasp them. Their complexity eludes the reach of abstract conceptual thought. They cannot be generalised.

I should reach for citations and argument to substantiate these claims, or so I am told. I should reference Jacques Derrida's work on the phallogocentrism of Western metaphysics; I should cite Michel Foucault's *Order of Things* to show how disciplines make the worlds they purport to explain; I should not just assert what I have come to know. Or, at the very least, I should not claim that what I say is worthy of being called 'knowledge'.

Should I cite the hospital records to corroborate my account of my mother's death? What should I cite to prove that she looked back at me from the mirror that day after? Should I have taken a selfie to document the plausibility of my story, or, maybe, just maybe, could I leave it to my readers to judge?

In studying global politics, should we not, rather, especially given the violence of our subject matter, purge our tongues, and 'set aside' all we 'know or believe about nations, wars, leaders, the governed and ungovernable', as Toni Morrison does when she addresses the dead of September 11: 'those children of ancestors born in every continent on the planet: Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas ...; born of ancestors who wore kilts, obis, saris, geles, wide straw hats, yarmulkes, goatskin, wooden shoes, feathers and cloths to cover their hair'.[42] The discipline of international relations brings to life only those it can stomach. I'm sure I'm not the only one to be troubled by this, but this is what many who work in the discipline have to buy into, and we are

asked to teach our students to forget all they know, before they reach us, of their formation by race, class and gender and buy into it too.

Coates writes: 'My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft.'[43] We teach students that they are separate from the world and can change it. We do not teach them that this notion might be what produces that world and its manifold injustices in the first place.

Steedman's mother wanted 'fine clothes, glamour, money'. In the early 1970s, at the time when Derrida and Foucault were writing, and not long after Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* had appeared in English, John Berger made a documentary series for the BBC called *Ways of Seeing*.[44] 'Glamour', he wrote in the accompanying book, 'cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion.' Our contemporary world provides the ground for such an emotion: as Berger says, people 'live in the contradiction between what [they are] and what [they] would like to be'. Compounded with a sense of powerlessness, envy 'dissolves into recurrent day-dreams'.[45] We are 'situated in a future continually deferred [that] excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it.'[46]

Or, as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge put it, slightly differently:

> The proletariat makes experiences on its own; their evaluation is carried out by leaders, theoreticians, writers, who in their mode of production are located in a substantive and, by intent, emancipatory context but who, in formal terms, constitute a bourgeois public sphere.[47]

Is what we sell the glamour of a university degree? The promise that once acquired, it will make life better, more enviable? Is what we write, and what we teach our students to write, the evaluation of others' experiences in our own terms? The imposition of order upon difference, the conceptual upon the inexpressible, in the name of emancipating those others? What if we wrote our contradictory, complicated selves into the teaching and the writing, and allowed our students to do the same? Or is that just another fantasy? Can we academics, whatever our origins, our histories, learn to give

up on the fantasy, to live in, not apart from, the world, and to acknowledge and accept the vulnerable, mortal, irreplaceable beings intimately conjoined with each other and the universe that we are?

To use Martel's terms, we are all interpellated – colonised – but that interpellation is always a misinterpellation, whatever our class position. We need to find ways of amplifying that, and drawing out its subversive power. This essay, and this book, have tried to bring back, not the political as in the subtitle of my first book, which of course is always there, but the person. The acknowledgement and acceptance of ourselves as the incoherent, chaotic and untameable mortals that we are, the subject of no lack other than that which is apparently imposed on us, and which we seem to accede to ourselves, is key. Only then – decolonised – can we see the questions of international politics otherwise, and begin to enhance and make visible – or rather stop hiding – the already existing alternatives to contemporary forms of power. Or is this a fantasy too?

I underestimated my mother. Perhaps because I had learned to see myself as male, middle class, privileged. For me she seemed to be all that I was not: female, subservient, working class – wanting glamour, fine clothes and a detached house. I was always pushing her away, closing myself off from her. Racialising her, even. I think she knew this and accepted it. Having arrived in my new location, my insecurity, my shame, perhaps, made me resist anything that could endanger that position. I wanted glamour of another sort.

## Notes

1  Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide*. London: Penguin, 2017: x.
2  Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015.
3  Himadeep Muppidi, 'Shame and Rage: International Relations and the World School of Colonialism.' In *Interrogating Imperialism: Conversations on Gender, Race and War*, edited by Robin L. Riley and Naeem Inayatullah, 51–62. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
4  Public housing, owned by the local authority and rented out, often, after the war when housing was short, to those like my father who were regarded as vital workers. Now called 'social housing', it is, as we saw in

the case of Grenfell, much reduced in availability and even more looked down on than it was at the time I am talking about here.

5  Séan Richardson, The trials of being a #workingclassphd. 27 July 2017. https://richardsonphd.wordpress.com/2017/07/26/workingclassphds/.

6  Paul Gilroy's discussion of camps and the 'between camps' mentality is relevant here. While he discusses the diaspora as between camps in the case of racially defined camps, the class diaspora – those who have crossed the class divide – could constitute such a position in the case of class-based 'camps' (Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*. London: Penguin, 2000: 82–5).

7  Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, eds, 'Testimonial Cultures.' *Cultural Values* 5, no. 1 (2001): 1–130.

8  Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

9  Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago, 1986.

10  Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 5.

11  Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 6.

12  Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986.

13  Coates, *Between the World and Me*.

14  Naeem Inayatullah, personal communication, August 2017.

15  Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood. 'Colonialism, Postcolonialism and the Liberal Welfare State.' *New Political Economy* (2018). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2017.1417369, 11.

16  Robbie Shilliam, 'Race in World Politics.' In *The Globalisation of World Politics*, edited by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, 285–300. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017: 286.

17  Richard Dyer, *White*. London: Routledge, 1997: 1.

18  Hanley, *Respectable*.

19  Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996: 7–8.

20  Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, 91.

21  Kenan Malik, 'Echoes from the Past: The Racial view of Class.' *Pandaemonium*, 18 August 2016. https://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2016/08/18/echoes-from-the-past-the-racial-view-of-class.

22  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

23  *Derrida*. Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman. Jane Doe Films, Inc., 2002.

24  James R. Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 96.

25  Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 55.

26  Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 2.

27  Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004: 128.

28  Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82.

29  Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

30  Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the State.' In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: NLB, 1971: 163.

31  Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

32  Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, 35.

33  Althusser, 'Ideology and the State', 118.

34  Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, 35.

35  Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, 7.

36  Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, 105–8.

37  Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject*, 42.

38  See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

39  Eric L. Santner, 'Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor.' In *The Neighbor: Three Enquiries in Political Theology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, 76–133. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

40  Marysia Zalewski, '"All These Theories and yet the Bodies Keep Piling Up": Theories, Theorists, Theorising.' In *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, edited by Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski, 340–53. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

41  Richard K. Ashley and R.B.J. Walker. 'Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in International Studies.' *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3, special issue (1990); Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations*. London: Hurst & Co., 2012.

42  Toni Morrison, 'The Dead of September 11.' *Vanity Fair*, November 2001, 48–9.

43  Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 56.

44  John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin, 1972.

45  Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* 148.

46  Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* 153.

47  Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward and Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff. London: Verso, 2016: 201.

# Conclusion

In this book I have attempted to challenge a number of the assumptions academics commonly make: assumptions that problems are to be solved and questions answered; that certainty and security are possible; that academics can take an objective position and pronounce on how the world works and what should be done; and, most of all, that we can change the world. I have tried to develop a different view, one that sees academic engagement as a careful, slow, step-by-step making or remaking of the world, often in the face of violence, working alongside those already involved in this every day rather than studying them from the outside. Each of the chapters has approached the question of how this might work in different ways. Concepts and practices such as memory studies, security and intervention, and enforced disappearance have formed the ground for these explorations. Central to the discussion has been the idea of a demand for justice, but what justice might be has not been addressed. Giving up on changing the world involves traversing the fantasy that we can *know* what justice, or indeed the world, might be.

Although I am offering an alternative view of what academics do or might do, I am still holding on to the possibility of change, to a dream of a different sort, or at least a hope, even if it is a hope without guarantees.[1] Although I refuse to adopt a certain more tragic sensibility wholeheartedly, maybe it is possible to accept the tragedy of a world beyond our control, if tragedy it is, and yet retain hope. That is what I am arguing for here, as I shall attempt to elucidate shortly. Traversing the fantasy and accepting the inevitability of a lack or an excess – in other words, the impossibility of certainty – does not mean abandoning hope, or giving up on dreams altogether.

A problem arises, Lauren Berlant tells us, when what we are holding on to, what we desire, is actually what is holding us back. She points to the example of a violent relationship, where we know it is doing us harm, destroying us even, but yet we cannot give up on it – because we cannot see ourselves surviving without it. She calls this 'cruel optimism': 'a kind of relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place'. Whereas a certain optimism is inherent in all forms of attachment, it becomes 'cruel' if it is 'a relation in which you've invested fantasies of your own coherence and potential'. When such a relation breaks down, it is not just a question of disappointment: 'the world itself feels endangered'.[2] When it stands, 'the placeholders for our desire become factishes, fetishized figural calcifications that we cling onto and start drawing lines in the sand with'.[3] In other words, returning to academic work, the attachments it clings to, for example, its assumptions about time, space and existence, become ways of making distinctions between cause and effect, problem and solution, perpetrator and victim, distinctions that turn out to not only be untenable but to produce the very 'problems' we wish to 'solve'.

Frantz Fanon's description of his encounter in the streets of France might thus be an example of cruel optimism. He had built his world around the fantasy of being French. When he encountered metropolitan racism, this world and his self fractured and had to be built anew. But his message is that it has to be built anew on a different basis, one of dis-alienation. His own alienation is an intellectual alienation, 'a creation of middle-class society'.[4] Fanon writes: 'I have ceaselessly striven to show the Negro that in a sense he makes himself abnormal; to show the white man that he is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion.'[5] It is the delusion – the fantasy – of separation and distinction that has to be abandoned. He calls on us to challenge not only metropolitan racism but all forms of distinction: 'The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.'[6]

The book has examined intellectual attachments that some of us seem to have as academics. I have argued that one thing that we seem to desire, perhaps most of all, is certainty and security. We like to find evidence to support our arguments, we like to be able to, and indeed as we saw in Chapter 2 *we are expected to,* make truth claims

– claims to certainty. And yet, as I have tried to show, the search for certainty is bound to fail – the world is not as we imagine it to be, and certainty is an impossible fantasy, as I discussed in Chapter 3. But not only is security impossible, but the drive for security can lead to its absence. The desire to solve what we see as the world's problems has a similar result, as Chapters 2 and 4 demonstrated. When we produce something as a problem to be solved, we are often in fact perpetuating the very system that led to the problem in the first place. What we see as the problem is often not a sign of failure, but the product of a successfully functioning set of processes. Chapter 4 also showed how the desire to help those we think need our assistance can be counterproductive: it reproduces alienating relations of superiority and inferiority and reinforces forms of discrimination, rather than reducing them.

These seem to be examples of cruel optimism, where what we desire turns out to be the obstacle to our desire. In Chapter 5, the desire of memory studies to disrupt simple notions of temporality and to challenge the separation of past and present – to see the past as not unalterable but something that is produced in the present for political purposes – is shown to be tainted by the very desire of memory studies to produce a better future. The autoethnographic account in Chapter 6 tells the story of the recognition of a similar contradiction in the belief that holding on to the dislocation of time that a traumatic event reveals can save us. Nothing can save us. And yet, that chapter ends with the idea that maybe we all carry the trauma with us every day, folded in our pockets. Berlant tells us that if we are to accept 'a realism that embeds trauma and suffering in the ordinary rather than in a space of exception', then it is in the ordinary that we must seek hope, not in fantasies of the good life.[7]

People recognise cruel optimism, even as they fight against it. In his poem *A Girl, Like, Y'know*, Tony Walsh tells the story of a working-class single mother. He captures both her inarticulacy and her insight. I weep every time I read that poem. In very few words, punctuated by 'like', 'and that' and 'y'know', she tells of how she became pregnant, of how, after the child was born, things became difficult. Her partner began to hit her and yet she still loved him. The bleak ending of the poem reveals her grasp of cruel optimism:

> And – sometimes – I feel, like
> I've – ruined me life, like
> But then I'm like – 'What life?' You know?[8]

On the six-month anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, which I talk about in Chapter 9, a memorial service was held in St Paul's Cathedral. A live stream was set up in a North Kensington church, St Clement's, so that residents who had not been among the relatives invited to St Paul's could take part. Sam Knight's article in the *New Yorker* tells how he sat at the back of St Clement's. The audience watched in silence. At the end of the service, 'the cathedral choir sang "Somewhere," from "West Side Story": "Somewhere. We'll find a new way of living, we'll find a way of forgiving. Somewhere." It was beautiful. Everybody cried. I cried. At the same time, it was just a song, and I found that I didn't believe it.'[9] But people cry because they don't believe it. Because of the tragedy of not being able to believe it.

I want to return at this point to ideas of hope and tragedy. Volumes have been written on both, but all I want to do here is draw some comparisons between the two notions in order to arrive at a somewhat more developed idea of what traversing the fantasy of changing the world might mean, and how it differs from giving up on dreams. I draw on David Scott's discussion of tragedy, which itself takes elements from Martha Nussbaum, before contrasting that with Les Back's notion of hope.

Tragedy is only tragic if we think the world predictable in the first place: not a view that would be taken easily by Walsh's *Girl,* or the survivors of Grenfell, or the relatives of the disappeared discussed in Chapter 7, or indeed anyone not in charge of their own fate in the first place. It is a particularly raced, classed and gendered position, and the tragic hero seems to be generally a male figure.

In his book *Conscripts of Modernity*, Scott contrasts the romance of anticolonial struggles with what he argues is the tragedy more appropriate to the analysis of the postcolonial world. For him, tragedy questions a teleological view that sees history as progress; in contrast, it honours 'the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs'.[10] It is, as Nussbaum argues, 'centrally concerned with our constitutive openness to luck, to fortune, to

chance [and] our very mortal vulnerability to the contingencies of our worldly life and of our physical embodiment'.[11] We are subject to forces over which we have no control, something entirely obvious to some, though perhaps less so to those in positions of privilege.

Scott's notions of 'a tragic sensibility' attuned to 'intricacies, ambiguities, and paradoxes' and 'chance contingencies' is not that dissimilar to some notions of hope.[12] For Les Back, for example,

> Hope is not a faith that delivers a future. Rather, it is an attention to the present and the expectation that something will happen that will be unexpected and this will gift an unforeseen opportunity.[13]

Hope does not imply a teleology, nor is it the same as Berlant's cruel optimism; rather, it is specific and located:

> Hope is not a destination; it is perhaps an improvisation with a future not yet realised. It is not cruel optimism that hides behind a promise that is broken before it is even made. Hope then is an empirical question, [which requires] an attentiveness to the moments when 'islands of hope' are established and [to] the social conditions that [make] their emergence possible.[14]

If we think the world predictable, then hope is not necessary; we can aim for certainty, examining the past to foresee what the future will be. Tragedy is what happens when that certainty proves misplaced.

What are the implications for what we do as academics of giving up on the fantasy of changing the world based on certainty, control and progress, and yet retaining an element of hope such as Back outlines? I have suggested in the chapters of this book that thinking of what we do as taking part in the slow making or remaking of the world might be one approach. We can work collectively in small ways, attending to detail. I examined in Chapter 7 two very different examples where academics were involved in working with traces of disappearance in this way, assisting in the demand for justice. I have proposed that different ways of writing – writing ourselves into our work, for example – might be helpful, and that examining other forms of expression, such as films and plays has a role to play too. Phil Scraton's work with the Hillsborough Independent Panel, referred to in Chapter 9, and

over many years with the survivors of Hillsborough and the families of those who were unlawfully killed, is another example of how research and attention to detail can contribute to calls for justice.[15]

Academic work should be an art of listening, Back argues, rather than a science of data collection and analysis that reduces people to objects.[16] I mentioned Naeem Inayatullah's knowledge encounters and Stuart Hall's ethics of generosity in the introduction; both entail listening too.[17] What is heard when we listen, though, is 'always moving, unpredictable, irreducible and mysteriously opaque'.[18] And listening entails acknowledging our own position in the world, as far as we can, rather than disavowing it and adopting a pretence of objectivity. As well as bringing ourselves back into our work, it means seeing our interlocutors as complex, grounded people too, with histories and relations. Back notes that in the wards of the hospital in Croydon where his father died, 'people just disappeared, they were not remarked upon, they were mostly working-class people and – like my father – they simply vanished'.[19] The desire to hold on to those whose lives would otherwise vanish without trace motivates his work. My autobiographical accounts in Chapters 1 and 10 clearly have something of the same purpose, but my accounts of people in other chapters do too.

Berlant proposes something similar to a remaking of the world when she talks of 'repairing politics', but without needing the normal legitimation of either a fantasy of what the ends are to be or confirmation that the action does actually change the world:

> One 'does politics' to be in the political with others, in a becoming-democratic that involves sentience, focus and a comic sense of the pleasure of coming together once again. Achieving and succeeding are not the measures for assessing whether the desire for the political was ridiculous: a kind of affective consonance is.[20]

As we saw in the discussion of Grenfell in Chapter 9, 'these actions emerge in an atmosphere of belatedness and outrage at not mattering'.[21] Berlant goes on to suggest that 'the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy'. If we are to detach from the fantasy of the good life that begets a cruel optimism, we need another

fantasy that will motor the change, 'along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it'.[22] She expresses the hope that the form of political action she has outlined, which doesn't sound too far removed from the encounters, forms of generosity, listening and remaking that I have mentioned already, can lead to images of what a worthwhile world might be.

As astronomer Gaspar Galaz told us in Chapter 8, the present is a fine line that a puff of air would destroy. We live in past worlds and project ourselves towards a future. But to paraphrase Fanon, the new world is not, any more than the old. Both are in process, becoming, not fixed or known. Under these circumstances, changing the world is not a dream. It is traversing *that* fantasy – and recognising that changing the world is happening all the time – that matters.

## Notes

1   Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantees.' *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 28–44.

2   Lauren Berlant, 'On Her Book *Cruel Optimism*: Cover Interview.' *Rorotoko*, 5 June 2012. http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism.

3   Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393–419; 414.

4   Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986: 224.

5   Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 225.

6   Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

7   Berlant, 'On Her Book *Cruel Optimism*.'

8   Tony Walsh, 'A Girl, Like, Y'know.' In *Sex & Love & Rock&Roll*, 37. Portishead: Burning Eye Books, 2013. For a performance of the poem, filmed in Heaton Park, Manchester by Richard Davis during October 2011, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3xOq9dv90A.

9   Sam Knight, 'The Year the Grenfell Tower Fire Revealed the Lie that Londoners Tell Themselves.' *New Yorker*, 27 December 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/the-year-the-grenfell-tower-fire-revealed-the-lie-that-londoners-tell-themselves.

10  David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004: 13.

11  Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 182.

12  Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 210.

13  Les Back, 'Blind Pessimism and the Sociology of Hope.' *Discover Society* 27 (1 December 2015). https://discoversociety.org/2015/12/01/blind-pessimism-and-the-sociology-of-hope/.

14  Back, 'Blind Pessimism.'

15  Phil Scraton, *Hillsborough: The Truth*. Updated ed. London: Transworld, 2016.

16  Les Back, *The Art of Listening*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

17  Naeem Inayatullah, 'Why Do Some People Think They Know What Is Good for Others?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 450–71. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014; David Scott, 'Stuart Hall's Ethics.' *Small Axe* 17 (2005): 1–16.

18  Back, *The Art of Listening*, 3.

19  Back, *The Art of Listening*, 3.

20  Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011: 260.

21  Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 261.

22  Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 263.

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