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Flora Cornish

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RESEARCH PAPER

'Grenfell changes everything?' Activism beyond hope and despair

Flora Cornish

Department of Methodology, London School of Economics and Political Sciences, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

The horror of the devastating Grenfell Tower fire, and the shock that 'it could happen here', in 21st century Britain, led politicians, professionals, and community workers to proclaim that 'Grenfell changes everything'. Affected people, turned into activists by the disaster, committed to ensuring that such a disaster could never happen again, by demanding changes to regulations and policy. Whereas public health literature addressing activism focuses on strategies and conditions for 'successful' collective action, the experience of activism after Grenfell has been characterised by frustrating partial wins, inertia, delay, and setback. This paper seeks to theorise the activist condition of seeking change that is refused and to do so in a way that values the agency and care of (thwarted) activism. Inspired by Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' and critical scholarship on hope, and drawing on three years of knowledge exchange and ethnographic engagement with the community response after Grenfell, I explore the trajectories of six activist change efforts: a fire safety campaign, engagements with a Public Inquiry, campaigns to preserve community assets, community gardening, silent walks, and provision of support to children at a community centre, each addressing social determinants of health and 'staying with the trouble' in different ways. I argue that setbacks do not invalidate a struggle or warrant despair, but that in insisting on caring for others' lives, activism succeeds in instantiating a caring world. Beyond hope and despair is the staying power of communities who value human life and solidarity and keep fighting for them.

We lost. Now what? (Natalie Osborne, 2019).

There are people who can make flowers grow where it had seemed impossible. (Motto on a pennant given by Portuguese peasant farmers to Paulo Freire, 1969, in Freire, 1992)

For people who engaged with and cared about the process of securing life-protective change after the Grenfell Tower fire, the first half of 2019, approaching the second anniversary of the disaster, was a gruelling period. Seventy-two lives had been traumatically lost on 14 June 2017. The disaster revealed national deficiencies in fire safety, silencing of residents' voices, and the massive caring capacity of community mutual aid, prompting politicians, housing professionals and community workers to proclaim that 'Grenfell changes everything'. But as the two-year anniversary approached that cry was ringing hollow. The Public Inquiry into the causes of the disaster had finished its first phase of taking evidence in December 2018, turned down the requests of bereaved and survivors to make interim fire safety recommendations, and announced an expected publication date for its first report in October 2019. The Metropolitan Police announced in March 2019 that criminal charges would not be brought until the completion of the Public Inquiry, anticipated in late 2021. Concerns

about contamination of the local soil with toxic products of the fire had peaked with publication of a scientific article in March 2019, but the follow-up actions seemed to proceed at a snail's pace. As an engaged scholar working with local colleagues to document the community response after the disaster, I had developed stakes in the hope that 'Grenfell changes everything'. I too felt the emotional flows of urgency, disappointment, hope, and despair, and approached the second anniversary with a sense of dread, for the grief it represented, but also for the significance of that milestone for our reflections on progress made, but more significantly, not made. There was a dawning horror that nothing would ever change. And then, on the night of 12 June, an image appeared on my twitter feed of a tower block adjacent to Grenfell, lit up with the projected message '2 years after Grenfell, this building still has no sprinklers'. On the night of 17 June, a new guerrilla projection made the Houses of Parliament proclaim that '2 years after Grenfell, this building still hasn't kept its promises'. My despair met a counter-weight. The weight of the lack of progress had a match in the persistence and boldness of survivors and bereaved families.

In this paper, I aim to characterise the activist condition of seeking change, while meeting refusal, denial, and delay, and to find a way of recognising the simultaneity of successes and failures. Documenting the multiple steps forward and backward in struggles for change post-Grenfell has taught me to notice this condition, and activists in this space have taught me about staying power and care for their community. I draw on Donna Haraway's relational ontology, and particularly her position of 'staying with the trouble', to resist the binary and often idealist categories of 'hope' or 'despair' insisting on their simultaneity and their material grounding. I use the term 'activism' here for the work of seeking and creating change in one's community and nationally, though few of the people I engage with describe themselves as 'activists'. Some consider themselves simply acting as good community members, not needing a label. But even for active campaigners, the label 'activist' is tainted, as in British political discourse it has come to be used to dismiss a person as biased and irrational with a single political axe to grind.

Collective action for health: 'success' and 'failure'

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the role of health activism and community mobilisation in tackling the social determinants of health. Foregrounding the structural determinants (e.g., taxation systems, regulatory regimes, governance structures, investment in infrastructure) of people's lifespans and health status, and the limited political will to alter those structural conditions, the health activism literature highlights the necessity of organised mass movements to demand life-preserving and health-enhancing structural change (Baum, 2007; Laverack, 2013). The related literature on community mobilisation addresses the role of community action both in tackling social determinants of health at a local level and mobilising support for movements demanding wider structural change (Campbell & Murray, 2004).

A key concern has been to identify and theorise the strategies and mechanisms through which social movements successfully produce social change (Bodini et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2010). Scholars distinguish mechanisms internal to a community to mobilise support and articulate a voice, and strategies beyond the community to create alliances and partnerships with powerful groups to strengthen the impact of the demand (Baum, 2007; Came et al., 2017; Campbell, 2020; Nandi, 2018). With a progressive, action-oriented impulse, this work drives at understanding the conditions and mechanisms for successful action. Colvin (2020) crystallises this approach in his call for an 'implementation science' of activism, implying a systematic approach to evaluating activist strategies, strengths, weaknesses, and how to maximise their success.

This interest in steps to success, however, is tempered by a significant literature on the frustrations and failures of collective action, particularly given a lack of political will (Campbell, 2010). Empirical studies of community mobilisation observe weak, compromised, co-opted, and de-politicised versions of community mobilisation (Cornish et al., 2014; Speer & Han, 2018), and evidence the ways that unequal social relations undermine the capacity of communities and the

legitimacy of their voices. Explanations of the 'failures' of community mobilisation or activism efforts repeatedly return to the resilience of structures of unequal power relations (Campbell & Cornish, 2010). To guard against despair at the impossibility of change, such articles commonly complicate the picture by finding 'islands of hope' (Back, 2020) in instances of community creativity, disruption, emergence, protest, or critique, which show that alternatives, and changes, are indeed possible, even if they are made almost impossible by self-preserving power inequalities (Anderson, 2017).

Beyond hope and despair: 'staying with the trouble'

Is 'hope' the answer? The mid-21st century global context of unaddressed climate emergency, widening global inequalities, extraction, dispossession, and increasingly authoritarian politics is a depressing context for scholars concerned with inequalities in health and life, where 'hope' may come perilously close to denial (Osborne, 2019). The Gramscian phrase 'pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will' (Gramsci, 1975, p. 159) is often cited to capture the simultaneous intellectual analysis that oppressive structures are likely to further dispossess and silence, with a wilful action orientation that refuses to accept that gloomy prediction, envisaging and enacting alternatives. Neither romanticising grassroots efforts at emancipatory action nor cynically predicting the infinite shoring up of repressive power relations seems sufficient (Anderson, 2017; Back, 2020).

If the dreams of activism are often thwarted, and the experience of seeking change is experientially more an experience of set-back and 'failure', than a neat linear series of steps to success, how might we theorise this condition? Theories of social movements that specify ingredients of, or conditions for, successful collective action are a part of the puzzle, but do not capture the non-linearity, setbacks, and persistence.

Donna Haraway's (2016) term 'staying with the trouble' offers me ways of approaching 'failure' and 'thriving' simultaneously, with two key implications that resonate with contemporary concerns of critical scholars of hope. Firstly, Haraway de-centres humans, and their monumental totalising views of the future, whether as something to be saved by technological progress, or to be obliterated by the endless extractivism of neoliberal capitalism. Side-stepping this hope/despair binary, she foregrounds instead the practices of responsible, caring, often micro-political, art-science-community collaborations and other forms of joint action, albeit in the midst of catastrophe. Thus, catastrophic loss and destruction are not separate to caring, hopeful projects, but co-present and implicated in creative caring efforts. The second implication is that hope is not metaphysical, but 'worldly' (Back, 2020). As Paulo Freire put it, 'there is no hope in sheer hopefulness' (Freire, 1992, pp. 2–3). Hope must be enacted to be worthwhile (Ruszczyk & Bhandari, 2020), and enacting hope is a labour (Ramalho, 2020).

These theoretical considerations inform my goal for this paper which is to develop a perspective on activism that is not a model of a linear journey to success or failure, defined by milestone achievements, but a frustrating and messy journey incorporating setbacks, delays, time-wasting, and precious glimpses of worlds worth fighting for. It was the nature of activist struggles in the aftermath of Grenfell that led me to search for such a theory, not the theory that came first. I present accounts of some of the trajectories of activist work post-Grenfell, asking: What does the trajectory of wins and losses look and feel like, over time, for those closely following activist struggles? Given set backs and 'failures', how does activist agency persist? In doing so, I aim to find ways to value agency that is beset by setbacks.

Methodology

The following account has developed out of three years of knowledge exchange and ethnography of the community response post-Grenfell. I am a university-based community psychologist. Together with local co-researchers, as we pinpointed the centrality of epistemic (in)justice in the aftermath, we developed knowledge exchange activities to document and collaboratively make sense of the

community experience. I position myself as a scholar-activist, where my activism in this case is in co-producing and archiving knowledge, and in writing. The project received ethical approval from the London School of Economics & Political Science Research Ethics Committee.

We have conducted 49 interviews with a wide range of community actors (being written up separately). We are creating a database and timelines documenting (with meeting notices, flyers, social media material, formal documents, etc.) the community response, so far including over 74 active community groups and organisations and 400 community-led actions and activities – these are serving as material for ongoing participatory workshops. As an engaged ethnographer, I have attended formal and informal meetings, community events, and activities, usually several times a week over the first two years, less frequently thereafter, documented in fieldnotes. When I quote people by name below, I either re-quote something that has been previously published with their name, or they have opted to be named in write-ups.

I present here, not an analysis of all of this research, but, based on these engagements, an attempt to characterise diverse trajectories of activism post-Grenfell. It cannot be complete, in coverage of the diverse and vibrant activisms, or in time, in that only three years have passed and it is too early to pass judgements on 'successes' and 'failures'. I have purposefully selected an interconnected group of six change efforts, to cover a diversity of activisms across the formal-informal dimension. For each, I seek to characterise the particular nature of its journey, and how it resonates with the perspective of 'staying with the trouble'. Collectively, across the six, I aim to convey what it has felt like, in terms of flows of achievements and frustrations, to participate in struggles for change post-Grenfell.

Fire safety campaign: hard-fought, partial wins

Grenfell United is the largest grouping of bereaved family members and survivors. Initially focused on supporting the humanitarian and recovery needs of their members, as people's lives began to stabilise, they turned their attention to ensuring that such a disaster could not happen again, demanding change in two domains: fire safety of buildings, and the conduct of the public inquiry established to investigate the causes of the disaster. I address each of these relatively formal types of activism in turn.

In terms of fire safety, it was widely agreed, early on (confirmed in October 2019, with the publication of the Public Inquiry's Phase 1 report, Moore-Bick, 2019) that flammable cladding, installed on the outside of Grenfell Tower in a refurbishment, was largely to blame for the speed with which the fire spread and the impenetrability and deadliness of the smoke that filled the single staircase exit. Bereaved families and survivors have campaigned to prevent a repeat of the disaster, calling for the removal of flammable cladding from buildings where it was already installed, and a ban on flammable cladding for new buildings. Grenfell United threw their energies into influencing politicians and public opinion, joined by people living in blocks clad with flammable cladding. The housing magazine *Inside Housing* initiated the 'Never Again' campaign the week after the fire (Apps, 2017). In April 2019, a new campaign 'End our Cladding Scandal' brought together a diverse array of politicians, charities, and campaigns, including Inside Housing, Grenfell United, Manchester Cladiators and the UK Cladding Action Group (Inside Housing's campaign to End Our Cladding Scandal, 2019).

The UK government initially commissioned testing of cladding panels and indicated support for removing flammable cladding, but as the results of tests and investigations came in, the scale and complexity of the problem grew. Flammable cladding affected not only social housing blocks, but privately owned ones too, with shadowy lines of accountability. It was not only the specific Aluminium Composite Panels that clad Grenfell Tower that were of concern, but other highly flammable materials: High Pressure Laminate, and wood, were also widely used.

To what extent have these campaigns succeeded? Just over three years after the fire, in July 2020, of 455 high-rise buildings (over 18 m tall) identified as requiring removal of ACM cladding, cladding had been removed and replaced on 158. Fifty-one buildings had had cladding removed but not

replaced, and 246 buildings were still covered in flammable cladding (Apps, 2020; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020). This relative progress applies only to a narrow range of buildings. *Inside Housing* suggests that there are at least 1,700 tall buildings with other dangerous cladding systems, and thousands of medium-rise buildings (11–18 m tall) with dangerous cladding (Apps, 2020).

And what has the process looked like, to reach this limited 'success'? It has not been a smooth story of progress, but every step forward has been partial and incomplete. When funds have been established for the removal of cladding, they have been insufficient. In May 2018, then Prime Minister Teresa May announced a fund of £400 million for the removal of cladding. In May 2019, £200 million was added to remediate private blocks, and then £1 billion in March 2020. Even the £1 billion is unlikely to be sufficient, according to *Inside Housing*. When government guidance to remove flammable cladding has been given, it has been unenforceable (on private building owners especially) (Bright, 2020). In July 2018, a property tribunal ruled that individual leaseholders rather than building owners were liable for the costs of remediation, landing leaseholders with catastrophically unaffordable bills (Barker, 2018). A major milestone was achieved in November 2018, when the UK government banned the use of combustible materials on new high rise buildings over 18 m (MHCLG, 2018). But even this result was not unambiguous. Hotels and hostels were exempted, as were some building materials, and buildings under 18 m (Kennedy, 2018).

In sum, for close observers and campaigners, the journey of the cladding campaigns has been characterised as much by frustration and failure as by its steps forward. Each 'win' has been laden with trouble, because it has always been partial, never enough to end the problem. When announcements that sound positive to a casual observer ('cladding ban', '£1 billion funding') are scrutinised by those with greater stakes, enormous gaps are revealed.

At one level, this account is a critique of the power relations which allow government to ignore or side-step action to tackle life-threatening dangers and respond to the actionable demands of affected families. At another level, it problematises 'success', underlining the vigilance, commitment, and care for detail required of activism.

Public inquiry: potentially unattainable justice, worth fighting for

In tandem with the fire safety campaigns, bereaved family members and survivors have been participating in, and following, a long-drawn out Public Inquiry established by the government to investigate the causes of the fire and make recommendations. Struggles over the scope of the inquiry (a narrow vs broad remit), and the make-up of the panel's personnel (with limited life experience or expertise in social housing, inequalities, institutional racism, or class discrimination) have been intense and long-running. Yet bereaved families and survivors have lent their conditional support to the panel and to its Chair, in the interests of securing some of the truths about what happened, as a step towards justice.

In October 2019, the report of Phase 1 (addressing the immediate causes of the fire, Phase 2 would address a slightly wider remit) was published, making significant findings and recommendations, and thus providing a sense of progress. To reach this point, however, had entailed a brutal journey, involving harrowing personal accounts of loss and danger, repeated delays, and rebuffs of the requests of bereaved and survivors. I draw out just two issues here, the tortuous temporality of repeatedly extended milestones and delays, and the prospect of potentially never securing 'justice'.

For those pinning hopes on the achievement of justice, the milestones of the Public Inquiry have become ever more delayed, the timeframe extended, the endpoint distant. In August 2017, the Chair indicated that an initial report could be produced by 'Easter 2018', in the context of a widespread sense of urgency. Easter 2018 came and went, and evidence had not even begun to be taken. The very first hearings began in May 2018, and the evidence hearings for Phase I were wrapped up in December 2018. To compensate for the delays, families formally requested the Chair to make interim recommendations, arguing that there was sufficient evidence on crucial fire safety issues to warrant urgent recommendations for government action (INQUEST calls for new mechanism for oversight on

recommendations in response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2019). Their request was not granted. The Phase 1 report was published in late October 2019, 28 months after the fire and 19 months after the initial date of Easter 2018. During the wait for the Phase 1 report, those seeking justice were dealt a further blow when the Metropolitan Police announced (in March 2019) that criminal charges would not be brought before late 2021, after the conclusion of Phase 2, to allow the police to consider the findings of the Inquiry. Late 2021 is four and a half years after the fire.

Natasha Elcock, then Chair of Grenfell United, responded publicly to the news, capturing the frustration of a permanent present of waiting:

> The week after a fire that killed our loved ones and neighbours Theresa May promised us justice. Justice for us means accountability and change. Today the police have said no charges will be brought until at least 2021. And we see little real change.

> We are living in a limbo with no individuals or organisations being held accountable and it is so painful for all of us who lost loved ones and our homes that night. We wait month after month, our lives on hold, for some kind of justice and progress. It is extremely frustrating and disheartening to now be told this will be our way of life for years to come.[1]

To experience the maintenance of the conditions that produced the disaster feels intolerable, evidence of a disregard for the suffering, the ongoing risks, and the actionable demands made by survivors.

And while the bereaved and survivors cautiously lend their hope to the truth-finding process of the Public Inquiry and the possibility of some form of criminal justice, they also entertain the possibility that neither the inquiry nor the investigation will result in satisfactory change. In the context of Bhopal survivors' interminable fight for compensation, Kim Fortun (2009) uses the term 'cruel optimism' (after Berlant, 2007) to characterise survivors' position in their legal battles for compensation: 'optimism' because the very long haul of a legal battle with a chemical company requires survivors to invest their struggle with the hope of success, but 'cruel' optimism because the chances of winning their battle are so slim that they have to commit themselves to a process that repeatedly disappoints and frustrates.

In the UK context, a Public Inquiry is an investigation of how and why a failing or a disaster came about. While it takes a legalistic form, run by lawyers who question witnesses and weigh evidence, its judgements do not have legal enforceability. According to a report by the Institute for Government, since 1990, 68 Public Inquiries have been carried out, at a total cost of £639 m (Norris & Shepheard, 2017). Only six of those public inquiries have received a full follow-up by a select committee, and the report recommends establishing processes for Parliament to hold ministers to account for implementation. INQUEST, a national charity working on state-related deaths, calls for a 'national oversight mechanism' to ensure that recommendations of inquests and inquiries are acted upon, pointing out that, had the recommendations of the inquest after a very similar cladding fire at Lakanal House in 2009 been acted on, the Grenfell Tower disaster could have been prevented (INQUEST calls for new mechanism for oversight on recommendations in response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2019).

In short, without accountability mechanisms, evidence-based life-saving recommendations may not be acted upon. Likewise, it is possible that criminal convictions will not be secured, as corporate manslaughter cases are notoriously difficult to prove. And even if recommendations and convictions are secured, the wider complex structural, social, economic, and racialised dimensions of the inequalities behind the disaster and its aftermath are very unlikely to be addressed through the legalistic process of inquiries and criminal investigations, being deemed 'non-justiciable' (Tuitt, 2019).

Writing this, I feel called to apologise for the 'pessimism' in these paragraphs. None of this 'pessimism of the intellect' implies that the struggle is not worthwhile or important. It is intended to be descriptive of the condition of activist struggle within an entrenched system, not prescriptive about which battles to choose. The commitment to life-preserving fire-safety changes is not invalidated by an unresponsive government or a failure to regulate for safety. The campaign does important things, asserting the value of life and the practical possibility of protecting life. If the 'optimism' is 'cruel', it is also necessary to our humanity.

Preserving community assets: 'success' after disaster is not a success

The nonlinearity of activist struggles is made evident by some local campaigning 'successes' in the wake of the disaster. I put the word 'successes' in quotation marks, because they are accompanied by much ambivalence. For years before Grenfell, the increasing divestment of the Local Authority of its public assets, and thereby the assets of local residents, had been the subject of resistance. Residents' Associations and housing campaigners had come together to resist the threat of 'regeneration' which, as in other London boroughs, would sell off publicly owned land and housing to commercial developers, reducing the capacity of social housing locally. Residents established the campaign to 'Save Our Silchester' in May 2016 in response to proposed 'regeneration' of Silchester estate, several of whose blocks overlooked Grenfell Tower. Other campaigns resisted the Local Authority's plans to move the North Kensington library and sell its historic building, and to close the local Further Education College. In the wake of the disaster, each of these campaigns' goals were (at least temporarily) met. Following a meeting of local councillors with residents of Silchester Estate, 2 months after the fire, all plans for regeneration in North Kensington were put on hold. Plans to move the library were shelved, as was the proposal to close the College.

Campaigners are painfully aware that these 'successes' in securing community assets are a consequence of the devastation wreaked by the fire, and the loss of legitimacy of the Local Authority. The last post on Save Our Silchester's blog reprints the letter from the councillor announcing the halting of the regeneration plans, on 22 August 2017, and responds:

> That's the end of the options appraisal but is that the end of the regeneration/demolition project? Probably, for the time being. That's some kind of result. Though it's not with a great sense of triumph knowing that it was the Grenfell tragedy that changed everything. Our thoughts are with the victims of the fire. (Save Our Silchester, 2017).

The catastrophe co-exists with, infuses, and over-shadows the achievement of these goals. This simultaneous horror at catastrophe, and working positively with the resources that exist, is another mode of 'staying with the trouble'. I suggest we should not treat these incommensurable but simultaneous affairs as 'positives' and 'negatives' in one equation, as 'amounts' of good that could in any way compensate for the bad, or as reasons to take either a 'pessimistic' or 'optimistic' position. Instead, 'staying with the trouble' means that the trouble is ever-present, but so too is the staying power.

Silent walks: meeting lack of progress with staying power and caring labour

Since the fire, on the 14th day of every month, in respect, memory, solidarity and for some, silent protest, hundreds, often thousands of people have gathered for an hour-long silent procession along the streets of Kensington, ending with a 72-second silence facing the Tower, in memory of the 72 lives lost. From October 2017, when I first understood that the walks were open to everyone to demonstrate solidarity rather than being a space for personal mourning, until they halted due to Covid-19, I attended almost every walk. People gather in quiet conversation before the start of the walk, but as soon as the organisers call 'Quiet, please, the walk will start now', the gathering shuffles into the road and silence descends, with the bereaved and survivors at the front, everyone else filing in behind. We walk slowly, filling up the street, requiring traffic to wait, with regular halts slowing our progress, filling the street with a sombre silence. From the middle of the crowd, one sees, over people's heads, huge green paper hearts that have been made at Henry Dickens Community Centre by volunteers, placards printed with 'United for Grenfell', and various homemade signs and tributes. An ethic of care and solidarity pervades. Out of the darkness, from people I do not know, I have been handed, in silence, a green LED nightlight to hold, a homemade green heart badge to wear, an umbrella to protect me from the pouring rain – gifts from unknown fellow walkers. Daniel Renwick powerfully expresses the intense significance of the silence with his poem 'We walk in silence':

> We walk in silence because words so often offend. […]

> We walk in silence because we cannot say a word that the events of the 14th June don't speak for us. (Renwick, 2019)

The walk is not an organised protest, it does not represent a specific campaign or demand, or have a specific slogan. The few words that appear on the green paper hearts, banners, and placards are short and abstract, e.g., 'truth, justice, just us, grace, humanity, courage, United for Grenfell'. The walk concludes with a chant of 'justice' but leaves open what form 'justice' will take. The silence is inclusive – attending does not imply alignment with specific demands or claims, associated with any particular organisation or viewpoint.

The peacefulness of the silence is a crucial dimension. Zeyad Cred, local resident and organiser of the walks, articulates his vision of the silent walks against the contrast of the 'London riots' of 2011. Acutely aware of the stigmatisation and criminalisation of young angry minoritized people, and wanting to prevent his angry and vocal peers and neighbours being labelled as rioters and aggressors, he saw the silent walks as a safer way of demonstrating presence and unity (Guardian, 2018). Unity after disasters cannot be taken for granted. Differences and disagreements between groups of differently affected people, especially in a context of unequal or perceived unfair access to information and resources, are common. As with other post-disaster communities, there have been disagreements over strategies, demands, and the legitimacy of different groups as representatives. Such disagreements form part of the post-disaster 'trouble' that is temporarily shelved by the silence of the walk. The walk is an expression of agency without a specified demand, goal, or end-point, and this openness has allowed the creation of a sustained, diverse community of people who might well argue if they were in a room discussing tactics and plans together.

Staying power is also intrinsic to the walk. After each walk, Zeyad thanks everyone for turning up, month after month, showing their solidarity and unity, so that Grenfell will not be forgotten. The walks happen in summer and winter, in light and darkness, in sunshine and pouring rain. They happen at periods of delay and frustration, and at times of a feeling of advancement and hope. The monthly walks stopped only when the Covid-19 crisis ruled out large gatherings, in March 2020, by which time 32 walks had taken place. As the UK re-opened, in July, the walks were reinstated, with precautions. While the numbers attending fluctuate from month to month, there remain thousands of people for whom the walks are a part of their routine. At the first anniversary, an estimated 5,000 people attended, and at the second, after a very frustrating year, an estimated 11,000. That presence enacts Zeyad's intention:

> as the numbers grow, it shows the authorities that were so absent that we're still here, we're not going anywhere, we're getting stronger. (Zeyad Cred, quoted in the Guardian, June 2018).

Les Back (2020) describes the walks as 'islands of hope'. They are not momentary islands, but a routine. A new practice and new networks have been created. In contrast to the highs and lows of activist struggle, the cruel optimisms, the jerky steps forward and back, the silent walk has a regularity. It recurs every month, irrespective of 'successes' or 'failures'. For me, it represents the 'staying' of 'staying with the trouble'.

Gardening in toxic soil

The silent walk ends in a concrete open space under the A40 Westway dual-carriageway. A large empty area sheltered from sun and rain by the roadway above, the space was claimed, in the days immediately after the fire, for spontaneous memorialising, to sort and distribute donations, and to share information. Artworks produced by children in special workshops were displayed along railings; young people painted arresting murals and unanswered questions about culpability on the walls. One wall was painted white and marked with panels to be filled in, titled a 'wall of truth' for a 'people's public inquiry'. It asked people to note their questions and witnesses to record their evidence. As people gathered spontaneously, the space gradually became furnished, with seating,

tables, a bookcase, a piano. At times, and regularly after the silent walks, hot food and drinks are offered by individual volunteers, some of them from Just Solutions 123,[2] a small community group who now garden a formerly abandoned large raised bed under the road. Marcia Robinson, one of the gardeners, describes how the space used to be one of those semi-abandoned, wind-swept, unlit, empty, concrete urban spaces, associated with fears of drug-dealing and danger.

When I met Marcia and some of her fellow gardeners in Spring 2019, they were wearing shoe-coverings and disposable gloves to garden the original bed. They had removed edible plants and built smaller new raised beds, where herbs and strawberries were being grown. The previous October, after repeated raising and dismissal of residents' concerns, news had broken in national newspapers about potential risks of toxic products of the fire having contaminated the local soil. No convincing reassurance or response was provided, and many gardeners throughout North Kensington were worried. Just Solutions 123 already had a couple of gardening sessions running each week. A young woman who brought her disabled brother to garden every week told me of her childhood memories of Grenfell Tower (she had moved out before the fire), and of the valued weekly activity and milestone provided by gardening. The gardeners had already invested much time and energy and were appreciating the results. So, despite the alarming news about potential toxicity, the volunteers decided to continue their gardening, with additional safety measures, to 'stay with the trouble' of toxic soil, not abandoning the precious beauty and connections that had been forged through the staying power necessitated by a garden. The continuity, regularity, and commitment required to keep plants flourishing struck me as the polar opposite of the sense of let-down, delay, and unreliability that characterised the experience of engaging with authorities to bring about change. A garden, obviously, depends upon continual care and 'staying power'.

Henry Dickens Community Centre: 'we've got to do something'

The silent walks depend on intensive behind-the-scenes caring labour. Every month they are organised, publicised and stewarded. Somebody has to liaise with police to close the roads, with organisations who plan to attend, and with the public and the media. Somebody arranges people and technology for speeches afterwards. I say 'somebody' because, to the public, who turn up and walk, it is not obvious who has choreographed the whole event and how. Staff open Notting Hill Methodist Church, which usually serves as the starting point, to help with inquiries, shelter when it rains, space for journalists and toilet facilities. The walks are defined visually by the massive green paper hearts, which are created, restored, delivered to the starting point, distributed, collected, and stored at Henry Dickens Court Community Centre, where sessions are held twice a week for people to make and maintain the hearts. I have often helped return the hearts back to their storage, gathering them together as people disperse, and walking them the 10 minute walk to their home, or bundling them into a car when there is a car-driver around, and I have felt grateful to play a small part in the monthly ritual.

The hearts are a much-loved emblem of the love and solidarity emergent in the local community and are often used in representations of Grenfell as an image of positivity. Nobody is paid or takes credit for the hearts. Indeed, their production is almost invisible, they appear for an hour and disappear until next time. But of course, they don't just appear and disappear. They are the product of masses of caring labour and committed staying power.

Henry Dickens Court Community Centre is another community space reclaimed by local residents who saw needs and found themselves called to respond. The Community Centre, intended as a resource for residents of Henry Dickens Estate, was, at the time of the fire, under-used, and usually locked. Residents recounted to me how, the morning after the fire, as donations piled higher and higher in the streets nearby, they phoned the landlord asking for the Centre to be opened. When no response was forthcoming, they forced open the door, got to work, and became a donations centre, sorting, distributing, and storing the tons of donations flooding the streets. A resident of the estate and art therapist, Susan Rudnik, on seeing children running through the Centre chaotically, and

young people distressed and angry, did what she knew how to do, brought out art materials, and mobilised her art therapist colleagues (Rudnik, 2018). Two years later, when I recorded Susan's story, Latimer Community Art Therapy[3] was providing art therapy in 22 schools, serving nearly 500 children, young people, and adults and supporting daily after-school kids' clubs, youth clubs, and holiday clubs in the Community Centre. Reflecting on the organic evolution of their work, she recalled being asked by her colleague on their first day of providing art therapy '"What time will we finish?" And I said, "I don't know really." We're still going now, Flora'.

Susan's colleague, Lucy Knight, runs the kids' clubs, twice-weekly heart-making workshops, and pop-up 'safe spaces' for children at meeting venues, to allow parents to participate in community and public meetings. A teacher, life-long local resident, and experienced representative in housing governance, she started the children's safe spaces after observing scared-looking children sitting in on one of the many conflictual, loud and distressing public meetings which took place. She told me 'I just remember coming away and going to Susan: "We've gotta do something, you know, these kids can't be sat in that." Rebecca Solnit (2009) describes the immense capacity for grassroots agency and care after disasters as a 'paradise built in hell'. The crisis temporarily makes it possible, and necessary, to side-step formalities and respond to needs. Susan, Lucy, and a whole team of art therapists and volunteers first of all made things happen, and then sought to solidify the conditions for the work to continue. Returning to the quote I opened with, they 'made flowers grow where it seemed impossible'. At times it did seem impossible, and in the longer term, it may be made impossible. There are basic material conditions – access to the space, funding for workers – which are necessary to their 'staying'. As Susan puts it 'it has been a constant fight' – in response to endless obstacles, over the keys to the centre, access to the outdoor space, maintenance of the building, a lease, piecemeal funding, short-term funding, funding cuts. Their presence is precarious.

When I reacted with wonder at what the Henry Dickens team had taken on and achieved, Susan answered 'we just did what anyone would have done, Flora, we tried to look after our neighbours'. In relation to my interest in theorising agency for activism, Susan and Lucy make that question sound overly grandiose. They find themselves called to use their skills to look after their neighbours, they see the possibility of a caring world, and they do it. As Lucy put it to me 'we are planting the seeds of the trees that ultimately our children will sit in the shade of'. With the resilience of extractive capitalist/feudal relations in Britain, through 'regeneration' and 'new enclosures' (Hodkinson, 2012), it is of course possible that Lucy's metaphorical trees will be bulldozed (so says the 'pessimism of the intellect'). But to accept that possibility would be to hand capital's bulldozers their prize.

Conclusion

Troubled by the frustrating journey of life-preserving activism after Grenfell, in this paper I have sought to develop an understanding of the capricious rhythm of achievements and setbacks, drawing on Haraway's perspective of 'staying with the trouble', and emphasising the tenacious 'staying power' of activist communities against the odds. Each of the six change efforts which I have described 'stays with the trouble' in different ways. For the more formal and public engagements to tackle the structural determinants of health – for fire safety, a meaningful public inquiry, and to preserve community assets – there have been achievements, but no unalloyed 'successes'. The building of health-enhancing community supports – through community gardening and art and play for young people – have battled hostile bureaucracy and lack of funding. Wins have been partial, possibly temporary, possibly unattainable, and even where significant, difficult to celebrate, given the context of loss. The wins are suffused with persistent trouble. Yet to focus only on the milestone achievements of goals would miss the majority of the happenings of activism and how it changes what is possible. Silent walks happened every month, gardening every week, and children's activities at Henry Dickens almost every single day, thanks to a wealth of caring labour and a commitment to a caring world. The walks grew in numbers, even as disappointments mounted.

I came to this paper from a literature on health activism which has focused, with a progressive intent, on mechanisms to achieve success (Colvin, 2020; Laverack, 2013). Such an approach resonates with the evidence-based policy paradigm, with theories of change, evaluation methods, and interests in identifying 'what works'. However, I have suggested that this approach also under-values the caring labours of activism and the visions of better worlds those labours enact. Robin Kelley, in his history of black radical thought, taught me to think like this:

> Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they 'succeeded' in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact (Kelley (2002, p. ix).

Kelley argues that there is value in the visions themselves and that without visions there is no positive struggle. From this perspective, 'success' and 'failure', are poor and arrogant concepts, taking for granted a temporary and contingent arbitration on what counts as a 'success' or as a 'failure', and incapable of seeing the simultaneity of the making and unmaking of a caring world when a group of people campaigns for fire safety – but is turned down by a parliament. In every effort before and after the bitter setback, care for human life is asserted, and a caring world is remade.

This position is relational, but not relativist. Noticing and celebrating a precarious caring world in no way compensates for the persistence of unsafe conditions. Achievable demands of activists (more rigorous fire regulations and lines of accountability in construction projects, better listening to residents, redistribution of decision-making power at local levels, endowments for community centres which nourish growth and cohesion) would materially instantiate a caring world and make a structural difference. But my claim is that a set-back or a refusal does not invalidate the struggle to get there, does not denote 'failure' or warrant despair. Beyond hope and despair is the staying power of communities who value human life and solidarity and keep fighting for them.

Notes

1. https://twitter.com/GrenfellUnited/status/1103427946939863042
2. https://justsolutions123.wordpress.com/
3. http://www.lcat.org.uk/

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Disclosure statement

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