

Everyday Ethics of the Global Event: Grenfell Tower and the Politics of Responsibility

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Introduction

In December 2017, six months after a fire ripped through Grenfell tower killing at least 72 people, the MP David Lammy asked what justice for this event would mean: 'For most people it means putting those responsible for the horror in the dock of the Old Bailey, on trial for gross negligence manslaughter' (Lammy, 2017). Yet, he noted a profound problem for those seeking justice, the families of victims and survivors: 'They have been asked to place their trust in the very same state that failed them so gravely'. For Lammy, this was symptomatic of a wider failure in British society:

What happened in June revealed a nation where the social contract between the state and the individual had broken down, with the concept of a collective society eroded. Not only do our councils no longer build homes, they also outsource responsibility for their management or upkeep. Our fire services no longer ensure that dwellings are safe from the threat of fire – landlords can simply get a certificate from a private inspector... As a country we take pride in our work in international development, disaster management and nation building. It is often British NGOs that are first responders on the ground in war-torn nations or after natural disasters; yet we failed to look after our own in the nation's richest borough.

It is partly these practices of outsourcing that will make it difficult to finally determine responsibility. The issue is that 'the many different institutions involved in council estate

regeneration – from tenant management organisations, to housing associations and private developers – results in long and complex chains of sales and subcontracts, which can be difficult to trace’ (Elliott-Cooper and Hubbard, 2017). This could have ‘serious repercussions’ for our ability to establish liability.

While these insights demonstrate how legal and ethical responsibility are obscured and dispersed by neoliberalism, they also operate with a spatial limitation: the statist frame. Whoever is ultimately responsible – public institutions, government agencies, private corporations, or individuals – they all seem to be within the UK’s borders. Lammy even emphasises this fact by contrasting the fire with the international disasters that *we proudly* take responsibility for through NGO work in ‘international development, disaster management and nation building’. The rather shameful judgement appears to be that despite such international prowess, in the case of Grenfell, ‘we’ could not even ‘look after our own’.

In this article, we argue that any such ‘domestic’ framing of legal responsibility clashes with the quintessentially global character of Grenfell and obscures ethical forms of responsibility. Not only were the victims and survivors from all over the world, so were the materials and subcontractors that contributed to the renovations, including the infamous cladding. Moreover, the fire occurred right in the heart of *London*, a ‘global city’ that prides itself on ‘welcoming the world’, on setting the cosmopolitan standard for urban centres internationally, on directing flows of global capital and originating the innovations in finance that now pervade the world (Bulley, 2017: 63-87; Massey, 2007; Sassen, 2001). As Doreen Massey suggested of London: ‘in considering the politics and practices, and the very character of this place, it is necessary to follow also the lines of its engagement with elsewhere’ (Massey, 2007: 13). In what follows, we will trace how these *lines of engagement* are spatialized, racialized, and commodified in a manner that questions the very possibility of attributing liability or accountability; prompting us to consider how global responsibility can be (re-)thought.

We develop this argument over four sections. Section 1 examines the literature on global ethics to draw out *a politics* of responsibility; discerning a valuable critique of the limitations of a ‘liability’ model and a desire to reflect the hierarchic social connections that underpin globalisation. In particular, we draw on the work of Iris Marion Young and Susan Marks to argue that ethical responsibility must engage the wider, structural relations of

violence that *produce* disasters like Grenfell. Sections 2 and 3 develop these points by questioning the idea of the Grenfell fire as a ‘regrettable national problem’. By situating the event within the everyday practices of a global city, the rich imbrications between migration, death and housing, we question the racial and colonial lineages of the fire. In terms of liability, the construction, regulation and governance of transnational supply chains that contributed to the disaster implies a difficult, indeed, *almost unanswerable* question of accountability. Thus, section 4 turns to the local activists around the Lancaster West Estate, where Grenfell Tower is situated, reading their everyday resistances as a vernacular discourse of global responsibility *per se*.

1. A global ethics of responsibility?

The literature on global ethics provides important resources to think about responsibility in relation to catastrophic events like Grenfell. Beyond sentimental tropes of sympathy or charity, ethical theorists provide reasons why people might have moral duties towards those affected by sudden misfortune, atrocity or disaster (Ainley, 2011; Crawford, 2009; Valentini, 2013). Against a state-centric account of ethical relations, a range of liberal, cosmopolitan, feminist and otherwise critical scholars have sought to articulate how a responsibility towards ‘others’ can be grounded in philosophical or/and institutional terms.

In particular, three elements in the literature on global ethics are instructive for thinking about Grenfell. First, the expansion of the scope of moral concern ‘beyond’ state boundaries introduces a question of how responsibility can be thought/practiced in global terms. Second, a range of theorists have engaged with the question of ethico-legal liability in global politics; asking whether responsibility should be limited to an individualist – and somewhat technical - account of moral agency (O’Neill, 2001). Here, there is an important effort to imagine responsibility in wider terms, whereby institutional agents or/and social structures are re-imagined as morally significant/consequential (Erskine, 2001; Hoover, 2015). Third, the work of Iris Marion Young and Susan Marks argues that the complex social connections, which underpin globalisation, force us to re-think responsibility in terms of the wider and structural relations that *produce* disasters like Grenfell. We address these strands in turn.

A broad proposition of the global ethics literature is that the scope of ethical concern should extend beyond state boundaries. Beyond early debates between

communitarians and cosmopolitans (Brown, 1992), the literature on global ethics has explored the philosophical basis upon which global or universal duties might exist. For example, the influential post-Rawlsian literature on global justice has explored the idea of duties of re-distribution from rich to poor countries. For authors like Charles Beitz (1999) and Thomas Pogge (2008), the inequalities that result from global trade and finance must be understood as a subject of concern for political theorists; akin to a ‘global basic structure’ that necessitates a wider account of justice (Buchanan, 2000). Equally, cosmopolitan democrats have argued that environmental degradation and global financial crises mean we are part of a set of overlapping ‘global communities of fate’ that should be embedded in cosmopolitan institutions and/or a global public sphere (Held, 1995, Linklater, 1998). On this view, the incidence of ‘disasters’ due to our growing global interconnectedness must become a subject of ethical concern. Indeed, one strand of cosmopolitan thought has addressed (apparently) random events like natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes) by reasoning in favour of ‘luck egalitarianism’, i.e. we are all as susceptible to misfortune as each other and it is therefore a duty to help victims and survivors (Tan, 2011; Valentini, 2013).

Building from this broad account of global or universal ethical responsibility, scholars like Toni Erskine (2001) and Neta Crawford (2018) have productively argued that legal conceptions of *moral agency* are too individualistic. Instead, we need to re-think collective institutions as responsible, if imperfect, moral agents when accounting for atrocity and disasters. On this view, institutions should be specified and treated as moral agents if they fulfil a variety of characteristics: a collective identity, purpose or intention; a capacity to decide, act and reflect; and a persistent identity over time. For much of this literature, the concern is with how *states* and international/inter-state institutions can be held accountable and become more morally responsible in relation to distant others that suffer poverty, abuse, genocide and disaster (see examples in Erskine, 2008: 2). However, in an underdeveloped move that may be highly relevant to the critical discussion of Grenfell, it is also noted that transnational corporations (Erskine, 2001: 72) and institutions that form the ‘infrastructure of everyday life’ (Crawford, 2018: 49) can also fulfil the characteristics of moral agency.

Beyond this effort to define ethical community or indeed new forms of agency, however, a number of authors emphasise complexity. For example, Kirsten Ainley (2011) raises the question of an ‘excess of responsibility’ for atrocities and war crimes; an excess

of political and societal responsibility that often overflows individual and statist conceptions of legal criminal liability. This chimes with the work of Joe Hoover (2012) who develops a critical account of moral agency per se. He explores the campaign for safe/affordable housing as part of *a political* re-imagination of human rights discourse to contest the commodification of housing, arguing that:

...emerging understandings of responsibility in world politics have been too focused on the actions of individuals, leading to the neglect of structural causes of mass violence and more indirect lines of responsibility revealed by attending to the wider social context. Related to this limited focus on individual actors, academic accounts of moral agency have tended to downplay the political aspects of this focus on the individual's failure to uphold their obligations, which obscures the power inequalities and particular interests that are served by focusing on individual actors over *enabling conditions and social structures*. (Hoover, 2012: 234 - emphasis added.)

Across these views, responsibility becomes an acute question of (and for) ethics, challenging us to think about the scope, moral agency, social structure and hierarchies that both make possible *and limit* our ethical relations.

Iris Marion Young (2006: 115-118) argues that existing accounts of responsibility have been dominated by a 'liability model', which privileges individual and technical lines of accountability. Instead, she engages a wider ethics of responsibility that arises from globalisation and its complex social connections. Young takes the example of sweatshops in global supply chains to illustrate how practices of sub-contracting can *actively separate* consumers and corporations from any (legal) responsibility towards the poor pay and conditions of workers in far off countries. Instead, she argues for a theory of responsibility based on our social connections. On this view:

...individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes. Our responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects. *We who are part of these processes bear responsibility, even though we cannot trace the outcome we may regret to our own particular actions in a direct causal chain*. (Young, 2006: 119 - emphasis added).

For Young, the benefits of this approach lie in the fact that it does not seek to isolate one or other legally accountable individual or group, but rather takes account of – and judges – the background conditions that permit (and produce) unjust relations. This is important because it directly address the wider global injustices and inequalities that might be related to a particular event or practice like Grenfell, that responsibility might be ‘shared’.

A radical variant of ‘shared responsibility’ is provided by Susan Marks (2011), who argues that we need to focus on the socio-economic conditions and global power relations that *produce* disasters in the first place. For Marks, this requires us to go beyond the kind of ‘moralism’ encapsulated in the liability model to explore the ‘*relational* character of social phenomena’ (Marks, 2011: 76). It is not just a question of victims and perpetrators, but also of *beneficiaries*: who benefits from complex of global social connections? For Marks, a critical response to disaster would relinquish the discourse of ‘root causes’ in favour of ‘planned misery’ (2011: 74). Thus, she provides a structural materialist inflection to the social connection model of responsibility. It is not just a case of accounting for phenomena through the ‘ideas informing them, but also in terms of their connection to processes of social production’ (2011: 76). This means asking what socio-economic conditions led to the ascendance of damaging ideas like, outsourcing, deregulation, etc. Echoing Hoover, a broader response would therefore have a ‘*repoliticizing* thrust’ that might combine an ethical account of responsibility with the ‘strategic task of channelling grievances into organized and coherent action’ (2011: 76-77).

Though Marks and Young offer a much richer conception of global responsibilities for everyday injustice, they also continue to focus on the damage created *by us, to them, over there*. As Young (2006: 117-8) notes, sweatshops exist in Europe and North America, but in this situation *the state* can be blamed for not enforcing labour standards. The implication is that any problem ‘over here’ can be simply resolved by the state; it is not a matter of *global* ethics. Instead, we will argue, what the Grenfell fire demonstrates is the presence of the colonial elsewhere over here (Danewid, 2019). And, as we shall see in the final section, local resistance to the global relations that produced the fire is already confronting it as an issue of wider and deeper responsibilities.

2. The everyday life of Grenfell

The previous section reviewed the literature on global ethics in order to draw out *a politics*

of responsibility in relation to disasters. Important considerations of the global scope and institutional agency for thinking/practicing responsibility must be set alongside a more critical focus on the social hierarchies and complex relations that underpin such events. Thus, while our examination of Grenfell will inevitably engage with elements of the liability model of responsibility, especially in relation to the moral agency of corporations and contractors, this should not obscure the contingent patterns of ‘social connection’ that *produced* it. For us, this idea of ‘shared responsibility’ is not some abstract ethical position, but is actually inherent to the *re-politicising thrust* identified by Marks, and which can be discerned in the manifold public discourses that emerged in the days after the fire, often from local actors:

The people who died and lost their homes, this happened to them because they were poor. We are in one of the richest spaces, not just in London, but in the world. Repeated requests were ignored. There is no way rich people would be living in a building without adequate fire safety. [...] It was an eyesore for the rich people who lived opposite. So they put panels, pretty panels on the outside, so the rich people who lived opposite wouldn't have to look at a horrendous block. (Akala, 2017)

Thus, while government responses sought to contain this ‘difficult’ political moment through tropes of accountability and the much vaunted (and delayed) ‘public inquiry’, a powerful outpouring of public feeling resulted in activism against local authorities, silent marches, and expressions of community in mourning (Prescod and Renwick, 2017; Renwick, 2018). On this view, the social connections that underpin Grenfell can be found within the everyday life of the global city; how people come to live, work, and die, in spaces of community, and, yet relative poverty (Bulley, 2019). Far from being ‘merely domestic’, a ‘regrettable national problem’, the social connections that underpin and emerge from Grenfell suggest a set of *global relations* steeped in hierarchy, violence and everyday agency.

For Matt Davies (2016), a turn to the politics of the everyday is crucial for understanding globalisation. The everyday is not some pre-existing local or mundane site, and neither is it a straightforward realm of resistance. Instead, it must be understood as a critical concept, allowing us to ask questions about the global power relations and practices that act upon (and within) *what we come to speak of as* the everyday (Brassett, 2018). As Davies argues, ‘examining the mutually constitutive relationships between the spatialities and

temporalities of the everyday and of contemporary international power relations made possible by colonial practices is the most important contribution a turn to the everyday can make' (2016: 23). Thus, against a narrative of London as a global city, of speed, modernity and multi-culturalism – indeed a space where events like the Grenfell fire 'should not happen' - an everyday approach can orient us to question such closures.

The global politics of Grenfell became immediately apparent because the victims came from across the world, the majority 'racialised as non-white' (El-Enany, 2017). Specifically, they came from Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, the UK and Nigeria (*The Guardian*, 2018). This super-diversity was also true of the survivors, a fact highlighted in the aftermath: families of victims and survivors from Iran and Syria were initially blocked from receiving emergency visas to enter the UK (Marsh, 2017); survivors opted against seeking medical and legal aid due to concerns over their immigration status – a perfectly rational fear prompted by the government's official policy of producing a 'hostile environment' for irregular migrants (Quinn, 2017). Such a border-crossing demographic is both exceptional and unexceptional for London which, in 2015, housed 36.8% of the UK's foreign-born population, far outstripping any other region (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva, 2017: 3). Nearly half (1.4 million) of London's 3.2 million migrants live in the comparatively tiny area of Inner London – only 319 square kilometres (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva, 2017: 4). Official figures show that nearly half of Inner Londoners crossed state borders from 'elsewhere' to reside there.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) is the smallest of the 12 boroughs of Inner London, but has the lowest proportion of residents that own a UK passport; under half of its population were born in the UK (Baker, 2012: 3). But this data hides a massive disparity. Looking at the ward where Grenfell Tower is situated, Notting Dale, demonstrates the differences in country of origin compared to the rest of Kensington and Chelsea – Figure 1 below. Whereas RBKC as a whole included nearly 6% of people born in North America and 16.8% from Europe (non-UK/Ireland), Notting Dale's residents include only 1.4% American and 12.3% European. In fact, RBKC has more residents born in Germany, France, Italy and Spain than any other borough in England

and Wales (Baker, 2012: 3). In contrast, Notting Dale has nearly twice the proportion of migrants from the Caribbean and all three designated regions of Africa.

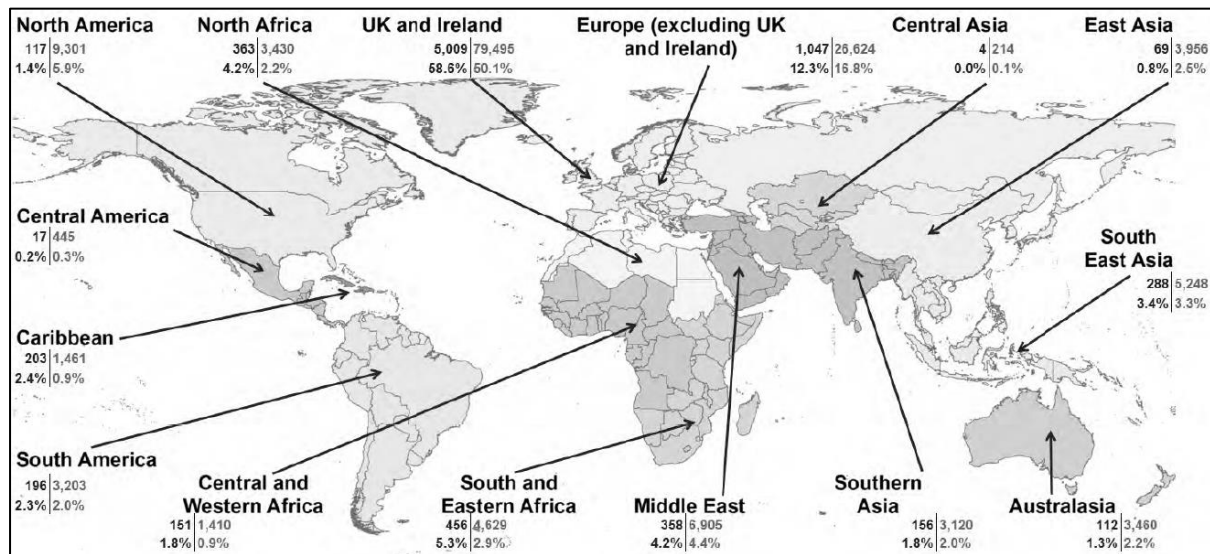


FIGURE 1 – Country of origin of Notting Dale (figures on left) and Kensington and Chelsea (on the right) population (RBKC, 2014: 4).

These demographics are graphically illustrated by the ‘Area Classification’ provided by RBKC’s ward analysis of the 2011 census. Here (see Figure 2), RBKC uses a combination of socio-economic and race/ethnicity signifiers to determine the ‘type’ of areas that make up each ward. Whereas the vast majority (72.2%) of the borough is defined by RBKC in deeply problematic terms as ‘Aspiring and Affluent’, four areas of North Kensington, including Notting Dale, are designated an ‘Endeavouring Ethnic Mix’. This phrase is used by RBKC (2014: 6) to represent an area in which there exists a high proportion of Bangladeshis relative to (often more affluent) Indians and Pakistanis, where ‘overcrowding is also more prevalent, and public transport more commonly used to get to work’. In other words, these wards in North Kensington are explicitly racialised as darker and poorer – 72.4% of the Notting Dale is covered in this manner.

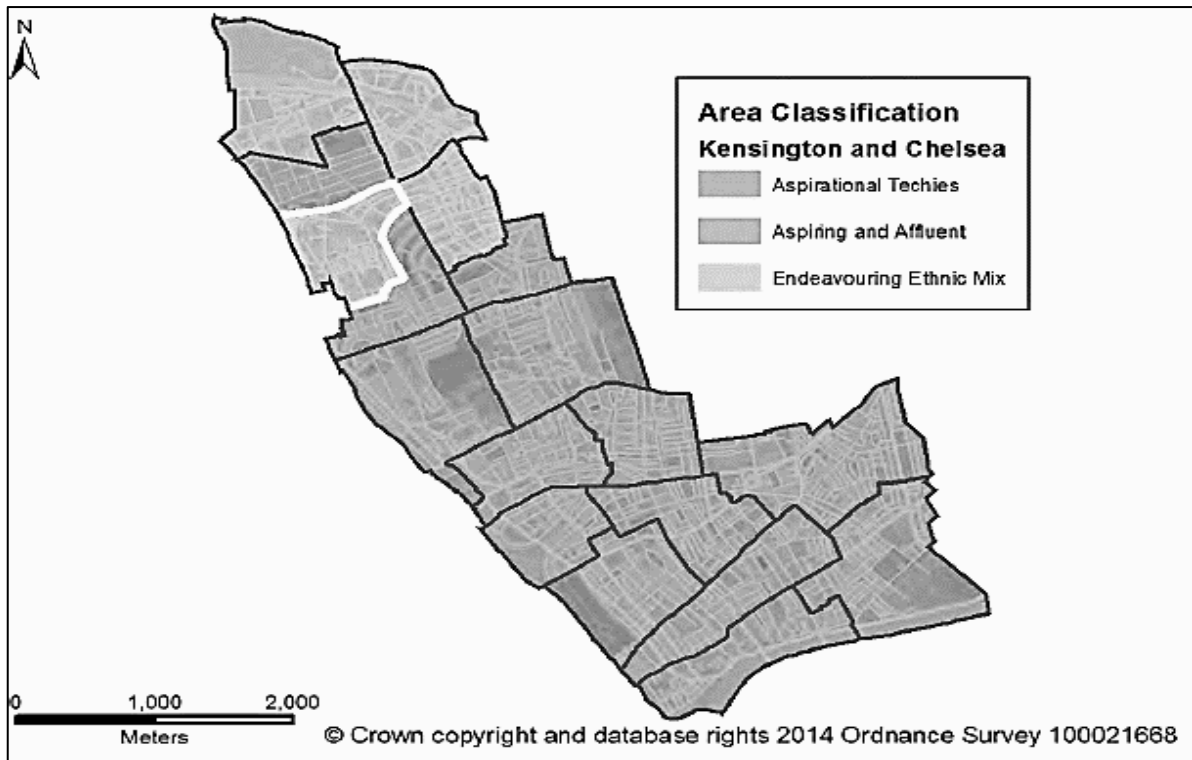


FIGURE 2: Area Classification – Notting Dale as ‘Endeavouring Ethnic Mix’ (RKBC, 2014: 6)

This is confirmed by the deprivation statistics (see RBKC, 2014: 6). Only 24% of households in Notting Dale show no dimensions of deprivation, compared to 44% in RBKC and 39% of London in general. So not only is RBKC comparatively more affluent than most of London, this is *despite* swallowing the deprivation of areas like Notting Dale and Golborne. The most relevant measurement of deprivation for the study of Grenfell Tower is of course related to housing tenure: whereas 71% of households in Notting Dale live in social housing, this goes down just under 25% for RBKC as a whole. The racialised disparities are truly remarkable.

Given the starkness of these divisions, we should be wary of viewing migration as superimposing race on existing class segregation in the spatial organisation of London. Journalist and former local resident, Ed Vulliamy (2017), describes how Kensington changed over recent decades. Much of the wider Notting Hill area had been built and settled by Irish people in the mid-19th Century. They were supplemented by the arrival of refugees from Franco’s Spanish uprising in the 1940s, and subsequently by the Windrush generation, the primarily Afro-Caribbean ‘cheap workforce’ of the 1950s. North

Kensington became a popular destination for people arriving from northern Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s, forming a strong, vibrant and active community in Golborne and Notting Dale (Cherti, 2009), followed by subsequent generations of individuals and families fleeing civil wars and scarcity in the global south. Deprivation, diversity and a long history of resistance to state power led to the formation of strong communal bonds (Renwick, 2019). Vulliamy charts the subsequent gentrification of Notting Hill to the arrival of property speculators in the 1980s, rebuilding and regenerating but raising rents and property prices such that '[h]undreds of families... left altogether while others were shifted into shabby private lets, or – if they were lucky, they thought – council housing such as Grenfell Tower'. The construction of the Westway – an elevated carriageway of the A40, completed in 1970 – had also displaced 700 homes and 1600 residents (O'Hagan, 2018). The result was a social and racial cleansing, forcing the darker and poorer, especially the more recent arrivals, into the only area that social housing still dominated – the wards of North Kensington visible in Figure 2 above.

Among the many lessons to be learnt from the Grenfell Tower disaster is that race should never be dismissed as 'epiphenomenal' or a 'distraction' to the 'really-real' workings of neoliberalism' in the global city (Tilley and Shilliam, 2017: 8; Danewid, 2019). Rather, these partitionings are, as Nadine El-Enany (2017) observes, 'indicative of ongoing colonial practices of state-sanctioned racial hierarchy and segregation in Britain'.

Many of the Grenfell residents and their ancestors suffered the dispossessing effects of European colonialism. They lived and fled not only the lasting material consequences of colonisation, but also the economic decline caused by global trade and debt arrangements that ensure the continued impoverishment and dependency of Southern economies on those of the North. The Grenfell residents whose faces now smile back at us from Missing persons posters could not escape their condition of coloniality. It haunted them, confining them to lives of poverty in a dilapidated and dangerous building in one of the wealthiest places in the world... The hyper-segregation and differential quality of life of North Kensington residents mirrors practices of the colonial era when British authorities instituted spatial ordering on the basis of ideas and practices of racial hierarchy and white European supremacy. This international and racial segregation is not some historical artefact, but a continuing practice of everyday life (and death) in the global city. The city produces and reproduces it

through everyday practices of consumption, circulation, production, and graphic design, drawing migrants in, dividing and housing them according to the financial interests of property speculators. In these ways, the global city contributes to the reproduction *and the replication* of the ‘elsewhere’ within its everyday life. The differences in housing tenure, race and wealth between Notting Dale and south/central RBKC are in many ways ‘broadly representative of a global reality in which racialized ‘Others of Europe’ remain largely impoverished, spatially marginalised and excluded from dignified housing in cities across the world’ (Tilley and Shilliam, 2017: 1-2).

3. The global production of a fire

The previous section disrupted the idea of Grenfell as a ‘domestic event’ by identifying the everyday social connections that produced the global population of victims, families, and survivors. Not only was this ‘global community of fate’ present in the ‘richest borough in London’, but they also lived in housing conditions stratified by the colonial and racialized logics of this *global city*. However, despite such complex dynamics, governmental attempts to ‘respond’ to the disaster have continued to figure the state as the primary site of ethical responsibility. The instinct has been to prioritise the question of legal responsibility (Lammy, 2017), echoing the ‘liability model’ of responsibility that dominates the global ethics literature (Young, 2006). To some extent, of course, the brute facts of poor construction/refurbishment all seem to provide a clear foundation for legal forms of accountability. Yet, even here, we will argue, ethics is constrained by a model of responsibility that begins and ends with the (neoliberal) state and its relations of subcontracting and marketization.

The fire appears to have started from the most mundane circumstances, a malfunctioning fridge-freezer. However, even this most local of affairs was striated by border crossings; when the model was identified as a Hotpoint FF175BP, the manufacturer, Whirlpool Corp saw its share price fall 3% by 11.30 am in New York trading (Morales and Ryan, 2017). Whirlpool were quick to issue a statement that this particular model was only manufactured between 2006-2009 when Indesit, an Italian company, owned the brand and five years before Whirlpool acquired it in 2014 – demonstrating that transnational corporations do not exhibit the ‘persistent identity through time’ required by some accounts of institutional moral agency (Crawford, 2018; Erskine, 2001). This

particular model could have been built in Indesit's plant in Peterborough, which closed at the end of 2008, or sites in Italy or Poland. This provides an immediate indication of the way that the global nature of goods, their manufacture, branding and ownership, is used to diffuse responsibility for death in the global city.

In the fire's aftermath, explanations for the disaster quickly centred on the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, which had cost £8-10 million from 2015-16 and had prompted complaints from residents that foretold the potential of a conflagration (Grenfell Action Group, 2016). Much criticism rightly focused on the Conservative-run RBKC council (Apps, 2017a), though the council neither managed neither the Tower nor its renovation. Responsibility for the social housing in the borough rested primarily with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) – a private not-for-profit company with a complex history linked to the deregulation, privatisation and marketization of the UK economy in the 1980s. As part of the liberalising wave of North Atlantic economies, the Thatcherite Conservative governments after 1979 undertook a range of reforms that introduced competition into industries and freed up the financial flows that helped make London into a truly global city (Massey, 2007). This included the introduction of competitive market relationships into public sector provision through 'compulsory competitive tendering' (CCT), allowing private firms to bid for public service delivery with the aim of reducing costs and improving efficiency. By the 1990s, this process had reached public sector housing such that all housing stock management had to be contracted out by 1999 (Apps, 2017c).

The result was a massive stock transfer of council homes to housing associations across the UK. But RBKC, concerned not to lose this much valuable property, exploited a loophole in the legislation which made tenant management associations (TMOs) exempt. TMOs were originally a democratic initiative, allowing tenants and leaseholders to take responsibility for managing their own estates and homes by creating a legal body which would be paid management and maintenance fees by the council or housing association (NFTMO, n.d.). KCTMO, set up in 1996, would retain something of its democratic origins with 13 tenants directly elected to its board (Apps, 2017c). It was a curiosity however – the only such borough-wide body in the UK, responsible for managing over 9,000 homes. By the mid-2000s, relations with tenants were strained due to poor communication and management of repairs (Apps, 2017c).

Due to the ‘divided responsibility’ specified in KCTMO’s formation, RKBC had to monitor the organisation’s performance and approve all work costing over £400,000. The refurbishment of Grenfell Tower thus involved both bodies, with KCTMO taking the lead, contracting the job out on a competitive basis, in line with the CCT aims which prized cost and efficiency. KCTMO ultimately appointed several firms to carry out the work (Moore-Bick, 2019: 3). This included the French-owned global project management firm, Artelia, with its professed specialism in cost management. Studio E was appointed as the architect, a London-based firm boasting a portfolio of projects around the world. The lead contractor, however, was Rydon – selected because, unlike the initial contractors approached, it submitted ‘the most economically advantageous tender’ according to RBKC papers from 2014 (Apps, 2017a). But Rydon themselves subcontracted major aspects of the refurbishment to a range of multinational companies. By April 2018, police detectives were said to be investigating around 500 companies (Cohen, 2018).

Importantly, Rydon paid Harley Facades Ltd over £2.5 million (more than 25% of the whole budget) to provide and install the new cladding (Davies, 2017) that has since been confirmed by the public inquiry’s first phase report as the ‘principal reason’ for the fire’s rapid and deadly spread (Moore-Bick, 2019: 557). As a response to the public vilification received after the fire, Harley’s website contains a brief statement which acknowledges its role in the refurbishment, while also noting that the ACM (Aluminium Composite Material) panels used are common within the industry. Furthermore, ‘Harley Facades Limited do not manufacture these panels’ (Harley Facades, 2017). Indeed, Harley bought this cladding from Omnis Exteriors, a group with subsidiaries in the UK and US. While Omnis provided the cladding, a key element within it was the particular ACM panels, known as Reynobond PE (polyethylene), which are manufactured in France by Arconic, an American multinational corporation. A more expensive variety of this panel, designated Reynobond FR (Fire Resistant) had been passed up by the subcontractors in favour of the flammable version (PE), which was £2 cheaper per square metre (Davies et al., 2017). Omnis issued a statement through its subsidiary, CEP Architectural Facades, five days after the Grenfell fire stressing that they did not manufacture Reynobond PE, nor did they choose it for the Grenfell refurbishment: ‘CEP’s role was limited to fulfilling the order for components to the specification, design and choice of material provided by the design and build contracting team’ (CEP Architectural Facades, 2017). What appeared clear to phase

one of the public inquiry was that the cascade of melting and burning polyethylene from the cladding was the principal reason for the fire's unusual horizontal as well as vertical progress to encompass the tower (Moore-Bick, 2019: 558).

The ACM panel was not the only problem associated with the cladding system that Rydon and Harley commissioned and installed. Behind the flammable panel and cavity was a layer of insulation provided to Harley by another multinational firm, Celotex. Originally set up in the UK in 1925 as a subsidiary of its parent company, the Celotex Corporation of America,¹ Celotex had been bought by Saint-Gobain in 2012, a French company with bases in 68 countries worldwide.² According to a BBC *Panorama* investigation, the 'RS5000' insulation supplied by Celotex had not passed the necessary safety tests and should not have been used on Grenfell Tower (BBC, 2018). Celotex used extra fire retardant on the product that passed an initial safety certificate, before selling a more flammable version to Harley. When burnt, this plastic foam insulation gives off toxic fumes containing cyanide, an especially significant detail given that the majority of Grenfell victims died of smoke inhalation. *Panorama* argued that Celotex knowingly targeted and miss-sold its insulation to the Grenfell contractors. The public inquiry found it 'more likely than not' that the insulation contributed to the rate and extent of the conflagration (Moore-Bick, 2019: 557). And yet the cladding was reportedly checked and approved by a building control officer from RBKC in May 2015. In early 2017, KCTMO had assured residents that, in the event of a fire, they should stay inside their flats 'because Grenfell was designed according to rigorous fire safety standards' (cited in Booth, 2017).

These individual decisions on the Grenfell cladding quickly became the centre of a great deal of investigative journalism in the UK. Official documentation revealed that the original contract had included fire-retardant zinc panels, recommended by Studio E in 2012 and approved by residents. However, after KCTMO requested cost-saving measures from Artelia, these were replaced in 2014 by the cheaper ACM panels which saved nearly £300,000. This decision was not relayed to residents (Apps, 2017a; Booth and Grierson, 2017). Cost-savings would ultimately bring the budget for the project down from £9.25 million to £8.65 million. However, these were not decisions that were taken without a broader context. Successive governments in the UK had sought to cut back on buildings

¹ See Celotex website - <https://www.celotex.co.uk/about/history>

² See Saint Gobain website - <http://www.saint-gobain.co.uk/markets/about-us/>

and fire safety regulation, eroding accountability in public provision under the guise of strengthening the self-help principles practised by responsible citizens (Shilliam 2018: 168-9; Lowkey, 2018c). Meanwhile, the wider political decisions of imposed austerity associated with the global financial crisis in the UK had led to the coalition government inflicting a cap on local government borrowing in 2012 (Apps, 2017b). The low budget of nearly £10 million for the refurbishment was thus largely financed by the sale of RBKC-owned basements in Fulham which generated £8 million (Apps, 2017a). This was partly why KCTMO turned to Rydon's cut-price bid (Kentish, 2017). The 2014 cost-cutting was thus part of a chain of decisions which led back to ideological deregulation, the global financial crisis and the subsequent imposition of austerity policies across Europe.

A wide range of failures, decisions and non-decisions produced a deadly environment in Grenfell Tower. The first phase of the public inquiry has drawn particular attention to the immediate problems of complex cladding, cavity and insulation system; the poor fitting of windows; the placement of extractor fan units; the non-functioning fire doors; the chaotic planning, management and fighting of the fire from the London Fire Brigade; and the absence of leadership from KCTMO and RBKC (Moore-Bick, 2019: 517-719). It is therefore sad, if unsurprising, that the second phase of the public inquiry had to be delayed until witnesses were given assurances that their evidence would not be used in criminal prosecutions against Studio E, Harley Facades, Rydon and KCTMO (Booth, 2020).

Drawing these points together, the 'liability model' arguably permits these technical evasions, alongside the initial confusion of subcontracting, corporate mergers and acquisitions. Instead, a wider account of responsibility would ask: what 'enabling conditions and social structures' created the environment where all this becomes possible? What about those bureaucrats, politicians and industry representatives that cut the regulation relating to construction? Indeed, at the micro-level, how many individual decisions on planning, tendering, regulation, materials and design are made in every construction project in a global city? How many small or major mistakes can be made in the selection and installation of materials, especially in a context of globally-sanctioned policies of austerity and cost-cutting? In terms of shared responsibility, how many life-threatening decisions and errors are inflected by the weight of international finance and its calculations of risk and reward?

There is clearly an ‘excess of responsibility’ here, just as in the case of atrocities and war crimes (Ainley, 2011). Beyond the contracts and sub-contracts that may – or may not – give the foundation for legal liability, there are myriad relations and market subjects that take part in the construction of the global city, while acquiescing in the uncertainties it fosters.

4. The politics of responsibility

The rendering of governmental responses to a state-centric vision of accountability can reduce ethics to a search for legal liability; a strategy that has largely demonstrated, rather than challenged, the capacity of neoliberal chains of contract and sub-contract, regulation and deregulation, ownership and implementation, to outflank the auspices of the state and its juridical framing of responsibility. Whilst such legal accountability is crucial, especially for those who have lost family, friends and neighbours in the disaster, something is lost in the rush to find someone/something ‘to blame’ for this ‘aberration’. In particular, we are at risk of losing sight of how these global spaces and flows must be ‘taken up’ in some way; made and re-made, inhabited, and lived (Brassett, 2018). A politics of responsibility can thus be located in the everyday lived experiences and resistances of the communities themselves.

Indeed, the residents of the Lancaster West Estate are well aware of the need to *politicise* structural injustice and evasions of responsibility. Ishmael Francis-Murray (Ish), who was born in Grenfell Tower, notes in his co-produced documentary *Failed by the State* that ‘Grenfell burned for local and global reasons... our local fight is against global enemies and structures’ (redfish, 2017). Likewise, the North Kensington poet, rapper and activist Lowkey draws attention to the confluence of issues that led to the fire, ‘that actually relate to wide, wide sectors of society; it’s not something that can be atomised specifically at the doorstep of one single thing. It’s a kind of end result, the tangible end result, of a kind of incremental and attritional form of violence that was pursued following the [19]80s’ (Lowkey, 2018b).

The dangers that Marks (2011) notes in looking for atomised ‘root causes’ of human rights abuses and actually identifying only the effects of structural injustice are replicated by prevailing approaches to the Grenfell fire that locate responsibility solely with individuals and institutions. Beyond this individualisation of responsibility, responding to

the Grenfell Tower fire means asking how the situation arose that people from the across the world could come to a global city, be offered social housing in an exceptionally wealthy, but racially and socio-economically segregated borough, and then be killed through a combination of abandonment and disregard. Firstly, then, as well as asking what governments, councils, TMOs and contractors *should* be doing, we need to concentrate on why they 'are doing what they are doing, and not doing what they are not' (Marks, 2011: 76). It is one thing to point out negligence, the lack of care and the social/racial cleansing of a borough, but it is quite another to ask *who is benefiting* from this arrangement. Likewise, a fuller response would go beyond cataloguing errors and asking: who in particular benefits from Celotex and Arconic mis-selling its products, or from sustaining a lax regulatory regime?

This is something Lowkey has been consistently probing, questioning the role of Celotex, as part of a 'transnational corporate class', in advising government on its deregulation of the building industry to serve its own interests (Lowkey, 2018c). Celotex directors certainly benefited, but what about stock-holders? Who is gaining an advantage from the low interest rates maintained by austerity, 'regeneration' projects that displace racialised minorities through the upscaling of urban spaces? Whilst some of these social connections generate a greater responsibility than others, most of us share *some* connection and responsibility for global injustice (Tronto, 2012: 306). And this could be profoundly uncomfortable for many as it requires questioning our own personal roles within property markets, gentrification and repurposing of space, the insurance industry, patterns of voting and activism, and the investments of our pension funds.

Second, then, a critical global ethics requires that we pay attention to the relational social connections that produced this global event and ask what responsibilities are created and evaded by this production (Young, 2006; Tronto, 2012). The stress on structural violence is recognised in North Kensington where local activist-residents such as Niles Hailstones (in redfish, 2017), Daniel Renwick (2018; 2019) and Lowkey (2018a; 2018b) all question the relations of class, race, economics and power that generated the disaster. Critical feminist approaches have long argued for an understanding of ethics which explores existing ties of obligation, responsibility and care; seeing them as a basis for ethical reflection rather than simply moral judgement (e.g. Tronto, 2012; Walker, 2007). Doreen Massey notes that space should be viewed in similarly relational terms, constituted through

the interrelations of different trajectories and ways of being (Massey, 2005: 9-12). Spaces such as global cities are thus produced through interactions, crossings, connections, contacts and their avoidance (Bulley, 2017; 2018). As Lowkey (2018a) notes, the Lancaster West estate is a ‘neighbourhood that exists on the doorstep of global capital’.

Attention to the relational character of spaces and neighbourhoods then means drawing out the way these interactions are organised and arranged, the way they include and exclude, exploit and enable, liberate and constrain, making live and *letting die*. Within this, certain responsibilities will be acknowledged and cultivated, whilst others will be denied or effaced (Walker, 2007). For instance, it is easy to reject out of hand the colonial legacy of London and the Grenfell Tower fire pointed to by Lowkey (2017b) and El-Enany (2017), but a response which demonstrates the historical and continued parasitical reliance of the city on the global south - through the wealth generated by slavery, the systematic exploitation of ‘irregular’ migrant workers, the ‘brain drain’ of medical professionals, etc. - promotes unease within the dominant account. A response which draws out the ways in which the wealth of Kensington South depends upon the mundane, everyday labour of the raced, poorer areas to the North could begin to strip away the quixotic ‘ethics of indifference’ (Tonkiss, 2003) which generally characterises ‘aspiring and affluent’ parts of the borough, through a direct confrontation with its ‘human cost’ (Lowkey, 2018c).

Interrogating these issues has been a central concern of North Kensington residents and activists (Renwick, 2019; redfish, 2017; Lowkey, 2017b; 2018a). But, third, we also need to account for how the materiality of everyday life in the global city comes to join and divide people, how it sustains them and kills them, how it enlivens existence and organises passivity in the face of injustice. How is life in the global city sustained materially – through food, water, transport, healthcare, buildings, infrastructure – and what international ties of obligation and responsibility does this generate toward the people who produce that food, provide that care, clean those offices, wherever they may be or come from? A fuller response to Grenfell must not only account for the global socio-economic conditions that helped produce the fire, but how London contributes to socio-economic material conditions (including inequality, scarcity *and conflagrations*) across the globe through its role as a sustaining node of ‘command and control’ within flows of global capital, goods, finance, ideas and labour (Sassen, 2001: 5-6). In other words, it must explore the way the

‘over there’ is already ‘here’, despite being often separated in even critical accounts of global ethics (e.g. Young, 2006).

Fourth, a critical ethics of Grenfell must have a ‘*repoliticizing* thrust’ that brings grievances together, makes the connections and prompts action (Marks, 2011: 76-7). There have been many local attempts to do just this, through occupations and protest (Radical Housing Network et al., 2019), art, music, provision of social services and silent marches (Charles, 2019). These are all part of a wide ‘counter-culture of space claiming’ that has a long history in the area and continues now (Lowkey, 2018a; see also Charles, 2019). However, Daniel Renwick (a writer, youth worker, film maker and community activist in North Kensington) notes that this space claiming, especially that organised under the Westway overpass by Niles Hailstones, ultimately proved to be an honourable failure (Renwick, 2019: 35-7). It aimed for a ‘radical alternative’ but failed to develop the sustained organised and coherent action suggested by Marks.

Rather than see this as simply a failure though, such local action can be read as demonstrating the critical interruption of prevailing narratives of global power and ethics that the ‘everyday’ provides. Though not necessarily connected to a wider project, through the everyday mundanity of caring, helping, speaking and claiming space, the possibility of a radical repoliticising response is enacted (Tronto, 1995). While our argument has demonstrated the ethical and political limits of current attempts by government to order grievances through legal channels and the public inquiry, this does not question the importance and productive potential of resistance, per se. Indeed, the politicisation of housing construction that has emerged from the critical public sphere around Grenfell Tower arguably develops such ideas by involving a larger, more everyday audience to engage with these questions. In particular, Lowkey has used his music to explore *and channel* the affective politics of the disaster. In *Ghost's of Grenfell* (2017a), he laments the ‘Rooms where, memories drowned in fumes of poison’ and asks the ‘whom it may concern’ at the RBKC; the words question where the missing are, naming each individual that died as well as their relations to each other. Noting how the tower was a place where ‘the extraordinary and the mundane were lived’, he questions a ‘political class, so servile to corporate power’. Indeed, through public commentary and lectures, Lowkey (2018b) has developed these insights to question the ambiguities exposed by seeking an ethics of responsibility in global context:

...you're seeing an attempt to obfuscate blame. So you're seeing the government on one hand saying it's because of the way that these companies have interpreted the building regulations. Then on the other hand you have a situation where local government have kind of been converted into conduits of corporate power. [...] John Weeks calls it the 're-regulation', not deregulation, re-regulation in the interests of capital against the interests of the human. (in Topple, 2019)

In Conclusion, while governmental responses to the fire might seek to contain, or order the complex politics of everyday life and death in the global city, such attempts are exceeded by the very subjects of the global event. Though not generating the coherent strategic action required by some, the everyday actions of local residents have globalised seemingly local concerns, demonstrating the relational character of life and death whilst resisting the domestication of response. Closing one of his short films on the remaining unanswered questions regarding the fire, Lowkey's (2018c) words call for, and enact, an everyday global ethics: 'This is a systemic problem. When people march for Grenfell, they are marching for you'.

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