The City of the Missing: Poetic Responses to the Grenfell Fire

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Abstract

This essay is about the representation and recognition of the victims and survivors of the Grenfell fire disaster in poetry written since 14 June 2017. It begins by arguing that the fire was caused not by a *lack* of knowledge, but a refusal to *acknowledge* the voices of the community. It shows how this refusal of recognition was both direct and systemic, slow and immediate, situating the fire in the recent and long-term contexts of austerity and the hostile environment, the demonisation of social housing, urbanisation and the rise of slums, and the logics of colonialism and racial capitalism. The essay then turns a series of poetic responses to the fire, read and discussed mostly in the order of their publication. These include poems by Ben Okri, Roger Robinson, and Jay Bernard, spoken word performances by Potent Whisper, and two tracks by Lowkey. Through close and careful readings of this work, the essay identifies a hauntological politics of acknowledgement and memorialisation that refuses social death and galvanises social life.

Keywords: Grenfell Tower, the Grenfell fire, poetry, racial capitalism, social murder, hauntology

Introduction: Representation and Recognition

> They did not die when they died; their deaths happened long
> Before. It happened in the minds of people who never saw
> Them. It happened in the profit margins. It happened
> In the laws.[1]
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> Ben Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017"

This essay is about the representation and recognition of the victims and survivors of the Grenfell fire disaster in poetry written since 14 June 2017. Its aims are not to diagnose or explain the cause of the fire, which is now widely recognised as a vicious confluence of structural and direct vectors of violence, from harsh austerity measures and the ruthless pursuit of profit, to processes of deregulation, outsourcing, and unaccountability, to the dehumanisation of a racialised working class. These causes are known to the survivors of Grenfell; indeed, they were known to the community many years before the fire took place. The community does not need academic concepts or theoretical elaboration to understand what happened and why. They do not need the fire interpreting on their behalf. This is because the root cause of the fire at Grenfell was not a *lack* of knowledge, but a refusal to *acknowledge* the voices of the community. This refusal of recognition

[1] Ben Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017," *Financial Times*, 23 June 2017, accessed 9 March 2022 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0096144220939874.

was both direct and systemic, slow and immediate. Poetry written in response to the fire, both at the time and in the years since, has sought to address and to rectify this particular form of violence. It at once represents and recognises a community that was made vulnerable to attack through long histories of deliberate non- or misrepresentation. By amplifying these poetic responses through close and attentive readings, this essay aims to contribute to the same politics of acknowledgement and to connect this to a closely aligned politics of memorialisation. As Robbie Shilliam reminds us in his considered comments on academic writing about Grenfell, "our scholarship must support and not sublate all those who think and work and survive on front lines."[2]

On 20 November 2016, just a few months before the fire, the Grenfell Action Group (GAG) published a now infamous blogpost, entitled "Playing with Fire," in which they predicted that "only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord […] and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders."[3] Founded by local residents in 2010, GAG was originally formed to oppose the redevelopment of nearby Lancaster Green into an upmarket leisure centre, but sustained neglect of residents' concerns by the Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation (KCTMO) gave the group further purpose.[4] In September 2013, a member of the group, Edward Daffarn, wrote to the Royal Borough of Kensington Council (RBKC) to complain about the area's unequal treatment, asking: "why are we forced to live in slum like conditions?" He pointed out that the council had spent £30 million on new paving stones for the neighbouring Exhibition Road, an iconic street home to several major museums and national institutions. He also noted the council's £1 million subsidy of opera in nearby Holland Park. Together, these investments signified a redistribution of wealth upwards in a borough that was already one of the most unequal in the country: though home to the highest average annual salary – £123,000 – in the whole of the UK, the poorest third of Kensington and Chelsea's inhabitants earn less than £20,000 per year, while more than 4,500 children live in poverty.[5] It is widely known that the cladding element of the

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[2] Robbie Shilliam, "Afterword: The Fire and the Academy," in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance, and Response*, eds. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Books, 2019), 197.

[3] This post has now been removed from the Grenfell Action Group blog, but it can still be viewed in the online materials presented to the Grenfell Tower inquiry. See Grenfell Action Group, "KCTMO – Playing with fire!" *Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, 15 June 2017, accessed 9 March 2022 https://assets.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/TMO00835660_GAG%20blog%20post%20-%20KCTMO%20Playing%20with%20fire..pdf.

[4] Grenfell Action Group, "About," *Grenfell Action Group Blog*, n.d., accessed 9 March 2022, https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/about/.

[5] Gordon MacLeod, "The Grenfell Tower atrocity: Exposing urban worlds of inequality, injustice, and impaired democracy," *City* 33, no.4 (2018), 464.

refurbishment of Grenfell in the mid-2010s was introduced to beautify the tower for wealthier residents living nearby. It is less frequently noted that the use of flammable cladding and other combustible materials were deliberately chosen over non-flammable alternatives to cut the costs of the tower's refurbishment, and that this decision only saved the council and their contractors a few hundred thousand pounds. As GAG prophesied, "it won't be long before the words of this blog come back to haunt the KCTMO management."[6]

When it was built in 1972, Grenfell Tower provided much-needed social housing for residents in an area that had been dominated by the notorious private slum-lord, Peter Rachman, through the 1950s and '60s. It originally represented a symbol of hope. But three decades of deregulation, privatisation, and demunicipalisation (the forced outsourcing of construction and repair contracts) muddied avenues of self-representation for residents, transforming "what used to be a clearer and more democratic line of landlord accountability into a highly fragmented set of often conflictual relationships between multiple actors all chasing the bottom line."[7] In two blogposts from the spring of 2014, entitled "life in a 21st Century slum," GAG described how then councillor Nicholas Paget Brown had attended a meeting with residents in which they explained "how they felt deeply embarrassed and ashamed to live on Lancaster West Estate following forty years of neglect and non-investment" in their homes.[8] Subsequent posts published "a monthly photograph to highlight some of the slum-like living conditions on Lancaster West Estate that we are seeking to improve."[9] Yet Daffarn and GAG were dismissed by members of the council, the Tenant Management Organisation (TMO), and the contractors – Rydon – who refurbished the building with flammable cladding as "rebel residents" prone to "disruptive conduct."[10] At every stage, avenues for self-representation were closed down and a recognition of resident's concerns was refused. These local refusals were exacerbated by the wider forces of austerity, with its demonising representation of social housing residents as so-called "scroungers" and "benefit cheats," and the hostile

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[6] Grenfell Action Group, "KCTMO – Playing with fire!"

[7] Stuart Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence, and Housing Policy After Grenfell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 7.

[8] Grenfell Action Group, "Home Sweet Home – Life in a 21st Century slum!", *Grenfell Action Group Blog*, 17 March 2014, accessed 9 March 2022, https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2014/03/17/home-sweet-home-life-in-a-21st-century-slum/.

[9] Grenfell Action Group, "Home Sweet Home! Life in a 21st Century slum! Part 2.", *Grenfell Action Group Blog*, 20 May 2014, accessed 9 March 2022, https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2014/05/20/home-sweet-home-life-in-a-21st-century-slum-part-2/.

[10] Opus 2 International, "Day 56", *Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, 20 October 2020, accessed 10 March 2022, https://assets.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/documents/transcript/Transcript%2020%20October%202020.pdf.

environment, with its attachment of national borders to the individual bodies of undocumented people, and which together enmeshed residents of Grenfell in what Yasmin Ibrahim has described as a nexus of simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility.[11]

While the word "slum" was used by GAG in their various petitions and campaigns in the run-up to the fire, the evidence assembled by the formal inquiry that has been underway since May 2018 shows that the Lancaster West Estate was viewed in exactly such terms by corporate developers and council leaders alike. Such representations partly have their roots in the late 1970s and '80s, with the slashing of local council budgets, the introduction of right to buy schemes, and the growing demonisation of mid-twentieth-century social housing blocks as "sink estates."[12] However, this association of neglected and over-crowded urban spaces with crime and decay has much longer historical roots in the genealogy of the word "slum" itself. As Mike Davis points out, "slum" was originally synonymous with a "racket" or "criminal trade."[13] Only with London's sharp urbanisation through the first decades of the nineteenth century did it transfer from a verbal activity to an adjectival descriptor of an area or place, at which time it also migrated outwards across the world to describe informal workforces gathering in Britain's colonial conglomerations. For the historian of slums, Alan Mayne, the word "slum" is a "deceitful construct" that is used "by controlling interest groups to disguise how private capital accumulation benefits a few at the expense of many others, and how the redevelopment of urban 'badlands' into desirable real estate can generate still more profits for the few and yet more misery for others."[14]

Writing of Grenfell in particular, Ida Danewid has drawn out the yet deeper continuities between the urban processes of policing and gentrification in inner cities and the imperial processes of racialisation, colonisation, and genocide in foreign lands.[15] More than 80% of those who died in the fire were from global majority ethnic backgrounds.[16] The first identified victim – Mohammed

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[11] Yasmin Ibrahim, "The burning tower: Grenfell as the 'optical machinery'," *Visual Studies*, 1 July 2021, 5, accessed 10 March 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1940263; see also Sarah Keenan, "A Border in Every Street: Grenfell and the Hostile Environment," in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance, and Response*, eds. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Books, 2019), 79-91.

[12] See John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London & New York: Verso, 2018), 271.

[13] Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London & New York: Verso, 2006), 21.

[14] Alan Mayne, *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 9.

[15] Ida Danewid, "The fire this time: Grenfell, racial capitalism, and the urbanisation of empire," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no.1 (2020), 302.

[16] Mark Townsend, "Grenfell families want inquiry to look at role of 'race and class' in tragedy," *The Guardian*, 26 July 2020, accessed 10 March 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/26/grenfell-families-want-inquiry-to-look-at-role-of-race-and-class-in-tragedy.

al-Haj Ali – was a 23-year-old Syrian refugee who had previously survived the Syrian revolution, escaped bombing by ISIS, and made the perilous journey across the Mediterranean through Europe to Britain, only to die when the smoke and heat forced him to jump from flat 113. It was not lost on some commentators that the tower itself was named after Field Marshal Lord Grenfell, a colonial officer who served in a series of imperial wars that consolidated British power in Africa and involved the massacre of thousands of Zulus, Xhosa, and Egyptians. Insofar as the Lancaster West Estate was configured as a "wasteland" in need of regeneration, and occupied by an "undeserving" poor who could be driven out, displaced, and terrorised without regard, the Grenfell fire was not so much an exceptional event as it was an especially violent and visible expression of the logic of centuries of racial capitalism.[17] As Danewid suggests, "gentrification might not be the 'new colonialism,' as is sometimes argued; rather, 'it's just the old one.'"[18]

Both the representation of potentially profitable spaces as "wastelands" and the racialisation of their inhabitants are instrumental to capital accumulation, as theorists such as Cedric Robinson and Jodi Melamed have shown.[19] Despite being somewhat stymied by its own failure to adequately represent the Grenfell community on its panel, the formal inquiry into the fire – ongoing at the time of my writing – has nevertheless gone some way to drawing direct and concrete lines between the structural and historical violence of racial capitalism and the fire that killed 72 people on 14 June 2017. One especially chilling exchange between the Lead Counsel, Richard Millett, and Peter Maddison, former director of regeneration at the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, reveals that the fire was not a consequence of human error, but an outcome of the system working as intended:

> **Millett:** When aluminium [flammable] cladding was referred to as alternative, did you understand that that was a cheaper option than zinc [non-flammable cladding]?
> **Maddison:** We weren't looking for the cheapest, we were looking for something that would achieve planning permission and that would meet the regulation. In reality, the project was delivered on budget, so that's the best sign as to whether or not the price was the correct price.

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[17] Nadine El-Enany, "Before Grenfell: British Immigration Law and the Production of Colonial Spaces," in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance, and Response*, eds. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Books, 2019), 50-61; see also Robbie Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 167-172.

[18] Ida Danewid, "The fire this time: Grenfell, racial capitalism, and the urbanisation of empire," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no.1 (2020), 302.

[19] See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Penguin, 2021), 9-28, and and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalising Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 39-46.

> **Millett:** Well, Mr Maddison, if I may say so, the fact that the project was delivered on budget is not of great assistance to us, given that we know what happened to the building.[20]

Most horrific here is the persistent determination to assert the "reality" of market logics – "the project was delivered on budget, so that's *the best sign* as to whether or not the price was the correct price" – as somehow *more real* than the catastrophe of the fire itself. Astonishingly, this identifiable and deliberate attempt to represent a situation according to the logics of accumulation takes place not merely in the run up to the fire, but even in its wake. The sinister industry term for the process that Maddison describes here is "value engineering," but in his response it is possible to also detect the shadow of what Hannah Arendt once called the "banality of evil." As she observed of Adolf Eichmann's apparent disinterestedness in his own role in the atrocity of the Holocaust: "That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it."[21]

As a consequence of the fragmentation of avenues for democratic representation, the media demonisation of the working class in cultural representations, the racialised distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor in political representations, and the heightening of inequality and deliberate removal of access to legal or economic representation, the Grenfell fire provides a similar lesson. It shows us that human life depends on representation and recognition; that human life becomes more valuable the more it has access to avenues of self-representation and the more these representations are recognised by others. But it also teaches us the opposite: that when we are not represented or when our concerns are not recognised, our lives become less valuable; that, in the most extreme cases, we risk becoming victims of "social murder." The historian of social housing, Stuart Hodkinson, who uses this term to frame his discussion the Grenfell fire, takes it from Friedrich Engels and his writing on slums in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. As Engels writes there: when society "deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is

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[20] Richard Norton-Taylor ed. with Nicolas Kent, *Value Engineering: Scenes from the Grenfell Inquiry* (London: Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 90.

[21] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1992), 278-288.

murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual."[22] This, Engels argues, is social murder, and the ghost of his writings on Britain's slums in the nineteenth century continues to haunt the assault on social housing that is ongoing in the twenty-first.

The poetic responses to Grenfell to which we will now turn have sought to bring these processes of social murder into view. As the Nigerian writer and longtime resident of West London, Ben Okri, wrote in the days immediately after the fire, invoking Engels's words in his own: "They did not die when they died; their deaths happened long / Before. It happened in the minds of people who never saw / Them. It happened in the profit margins. It happened / In the laws."[23] Against this refusal of recognition, poetic responses to the Grenfell fire resist social death by representing the city of the missing and recognising the community's social life.

You saw it, You heard it

The still growing body of poetry that responds to the Grenfell fire is united in its resistance to the social murder that took place in the years and decades running up to, and on the night of the 14 June 2017. It resists the systemic "value engineering" of a reality that, as Robbie Shilliam writes of the racialised categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor more broadly, "is made before and despite the facts being known or even being required."[24] It refuses this regime of racist representation and it refuses its refusal of recognition. As Claire Launchbury has written of this work, at Grenfell, "the structural and bureaucratic disempowerment of residents [has been] resisted by the interventions of a number of representatives, especially writers and musicians, who have fought to overcome the community's silencing."[25] By representing and recognising the Grenfell community, poetic responses to the fire aim to bring about a different reality, one that is rooted in the social fact of the community's humanity. Or to put this another way, by writing against the social murder that took place at Grenfell, this body of poetry provides a form of social life. In representing and recognising the community on their own terms, this poetry advances a politics of acknowledgement that is aligned with a politics of memorialisation. These politics together

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[22] Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses*, 5; Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, ed. by Victor Kiernan (London: Penguin, 1987), "Results."

[23] Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017."

[24] Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor*, 171.

[25] Claire Launchbury, "Grenfell, Race, Remembrance," *Wasafiri* 36, no.1 (2021), 9.

resurrect the reality of the community; vitally, this includes the reality of both those who survived and those died in the fire.

Memorialisation has reshaped the physical environment around Grenfell Tower. In the months after the fire, a large area beneath the concrete shelter of the Westway dual-carriageway was claimed "for spontaneous memorialising, to sort and distribute donations, and to share information."[26] The walls surrounding the area were daubed with artworks and murals, including a "Wall of Truth" that was painted white and divided into boxes in which people could write their testimonies. This wall was covered in images of the missing and headed with the words "The People's Public Inquest," while the surrounding area was soon filled with furniture, including chairs and tables, bookcases, and a piano and other instruments. A community garden was also established. Monthly memorial walks, taken in complete silence, attracted thousands of people and finished in front of the Wall of Truth, where speeches, votes of thanks, and further memorials were made. Finally, the tower itself remained as the most visible memorial to the fire, standing, as Okri observes in the first two lines of his poem, "like a burnt matchbox in the sky. / It was black and long and burnt in the sky."[27]

Published in the *Financial Times* just nine days after the fire, Okri's poem deliberately invokes and then deliberatively refuses the erasure of the Grenfell community. Though centred on the most visible and spectacular act of erasure, the fire itself, the poem quickly embeds this in the wider, systemic silencing that leads to social murder. The poem does this by repeatedly, perhaps even confrontationally, returning the gaze that the media and the British public had suddenly turned on Grenfell in the days immediately after the fire. These lines are taken from the long, opening stanza of the poem:

> You saw it through the flowering stump of trees.
> You saw it beyond the ochre spire of the church.
> You saw it in the tears of those who survived.
> You saw it through the rage of those who survived.
> You saw it past the posters of those who had burnt to ashes.
> You saw it past the posters of those who jumped to their deaths.
> You saw it through the TV images of flames through windows
> Running up the aluminium cladding

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[26] Flora Cornish, "'Grenfell changes everything?' Activism beyond hope and depair," *Critical Public Health* 31, no. 3 (2021), 299-301.

[27] Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017."

You saw it in print images of flames bursting out from the roof.[28]

In these lines, Okri's nauseating repetition of "you saw it" constructs the fire as spectacle and emphasises its hyper-visibility. And yet, Okri also retains a politics of refusal by never allowing us to see the burning tower directly: it is only ever *through* the trees, *in* the tears, *past* the missing posters, *through* the television, or *in* newspaper print. As a consequence, these lines are at once assertive and contradictory, setting out from the margin before almost immediately doubling back on themselves. They repeatedly claim, on the one hand, that "you saw it," while also reminding us – readers and onlookers – that, of course, we did not *really* see the horror of that night, that there was always something – a filmic layer, a kind of cladding, perhaps – mediating our view. In Okri's poem, writes Launchbury, the cladding becomes "a metaphor for the vacuous and the empty, a list of different claddings."[29] But it also operates as a metaphor for the thickness of racial capitalism's hungry optics, its determination to represent land as ripe for regeneration and to dehumanise those who stand in its way. In this context, Okri's repeated use of the second person, "you," takes on an understandably accusatory tone, interpolating the poem's readers and listeners as witnesses to – or perhaps even as culprits of – a crime. Indeed, on a second reading, these lines themselves feel haunted by the sentence that, directed to the council and the TMO and Rydon and successive governments, is almost there, but not quite: "you saw it coming."

The poem then turns away from the immediately visual world of concrete, cladding, and fire to a sonic plane assembled from more ethereal wisps of smoke, percussive echoes, and cries of ghosts:

You heard it in the voices loud in the streets.
You heard it in the cries in the air howling for justice.
You heard it in the pubs the streets the basements the digs.
You heard it in the wailing of women and the silent scream
Of orphans wandering the streets
You saw it in your baby who couldn't sleep at night
Spooked by the ghosts that wander the area still trying
To escape the fires that came at them black and choking.
You saw it in your dreams of the dead asking if living
Had no meaning being poor in a land
Where the poor die in flames without warning.[30]

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[28] Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017."

[29] Launchbury, "Grenfell, Race, Remembrance," 11.

[30] Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017."

This shift from "saw" to "heard" pushes us from the realm of the phenomenal into that of the epiphenomenal. While the repetition of "you saw it" positions readers in an *ontological* relationship with the tower (a relationship based on apprehension through sight), the repetition of "you heard it" removes this straightforward apprehension from view, positioning readers in a *hauntological* relationship with the tower instead. As the cultural critic, Mark Fisher – who took his own life just months before Grenfell – described, hauntology is a state in which the potential of lost futures are apprehended in the present: it is "not so much the past" that haunts us, but "all the lost futures" we had anticipated.[31] This seeps through Okri's subsequent lines, which mourn the "ghosts that wander the area still trying / To escape" and the "dreams of the dead asking if living / Had no meaning." The lives of those who died in the fire have not been erased; rather, their potential futures are still alive, haunting both the city and the community, and now the reader of the poem as well.

While this is a desperately melancholic image, it also contains seeds of hope, for it stands fast against the processes of silencing and erasure that made the fire possible, and which were then epitomised in the fire itself. As Okri repeats in a couplet that functions as chorus and refrain throughout the poem: "If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower / See the tower, and let a world-changing dream flower."[32] This refrain repeats throughout the poem, with the word "dream" changing each time, metamorphosing first to "deed" and then to "thought," so that the final line reads: "See the tower, and let a new world-changing thought flower." With this gentle, barely perceptible shift in each refrain, the poem slowly extends its life-giving command, enacting in its form the unfurling petals of the flower it describes. The poem recognises the tower and its residents, both those who died and those who survived, and compels its reader to do the same. In the face of social murder, the poem galvanises the flower as an image of social life.

Did they die or us?

This energy is carried with similar force in two tracks released by Lowkey, a rapper, activist, and local resident who witnessed the fire firsthand. The first of these tracks, "Ghosts of Grenfell," was made in August 2017, while the second, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2," was released to mark the fire's first anniversary in June 2018. The first track was accompanied by a music video in which long panning shots showed the Lancaster West Estate populated by local residents, with different members taking

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[31] Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology?", *Film Quarterly* 66, no.1 (2012), 16.

[32] Okri, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017."

it in turns to mouth the lyrics playing over the top. By showing the community speaking as one in this way, the video reflects the decision – made just days of the fire – to change the name of the Grenfell Action Group to Grenfell United, so as to better represent survivors and bereaved families, and to bring the community together.[33] The song begins not with the rapped, rhyming lines of its main verses, but with slow, spoken words that function as a kind of hauntological epitaph to – and apprehension of – the potential futures lost to the fire:

> Rooms where futures were planned
> And the imagination of children built castles in the sky
> Rooms where both the extraordinary and the mundane were lived
> Become forever tortured graves of ash
> Oh you political class, so servile to corporate power.[34]

These introductory words run straight into the chorus, where Lowkey's performance is combined with vocals by the Syrian-born singer, Mai Khalil, who moved to West London as a child. This chorus repeats three times throughout the song:

> Did they die or us?
> The ghosts of Grenfell still calling for justice
> Now hear 'em, hear 'em scream
> Did they die or us?
> Did they die for us?
> This global manslaughter will haunt you
> Now hear 'em scream.[35]

In this central refrain, Lowkey and Khalil extend Okri's hauntological recognition of the futures that were lost in the fire to show how that loss extends to and impacts upon all of "us" – an "us" that includes the community of survivors, but also by implication all those who have listened to the song, read the lyrics, or borne witness to the fire and its aftermath. This resonates most explicitly in the chorus's rhetorical question, which in its first two iterations asks whether in fact it is *us*, survivors and witnesses, who have died. The question is on one level metaphorical, insofar as it implies the moral death suffered by a "political class, so servile to corporate power." But there is also a literal component to this question, predicated on the fact that those who survived the fire are

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[33] See Grenfell United, "About Us", accessed 11 March 2022, https://grenfellunited.org.uk/about-us.

[34] Lowkey feat. Mai Khalil, "Ghosts of Grenfell," *YouTube*, 8 August 2017, accessed 11 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztUamrChczQ.

[35] Lowkey feat. Mai Khalil, "Ghosts of Grenfell".

still vulnerable to the same processes of social murder, at least until justice for Grenfell has been achieved. Lowkey raps:

> We are calling for survivors to be rehoused in the best place
> Not to be left sleeping in the West Way for ten days
> We are calling for arrests made and debts paid
> In the true numbers of the families who kept faith
> We are calling for safety in homes
> They are immortalised forever, the only ghosts are us
> I wonder
> Did they die or us?[36]

Lowkey is adamant in these lyrics that the dead will be remembered and that, in this sense, they have been and will be kept alive by the community. They have been represented and recognised: on the Wall of Truth, in the first two weeks of the formal inquiry (which were devoted to displaying names and portraits of those who died), and in the creative work of artists and poets such as Lowkey himself ("Ghosts of Grenfell" ends with a list of names that, at the time of the song's release, belonged to missing persons). Remembrance here functions as a mode of recognition and representation that counteracts the social murder to which the victims of the fire were subject. But Lowkey's other primary concern is whether those who have survived will be better represented and whether their material needs will be recognised. Lowkey therefore frames justice in the most expansive of terms, asserting at root a right to safe social housing that disrupts the representational mechanics of racial capitalism and resists its appetite for relentless accumulation. As Lowkey makes clear, while this systemic form of recognition remains unachieved, the survivors remain at risk of social death, leading him to wonder whether "the only ghosts are us," and to ask: "Did they die or us?" These politics are further expressed in the chorus's final iteration of its repeated question, when the "or" slips to "for" so that it reads: "Did they die for us?" In this question, the song asks whether the hyper-visibility of the fire, and of the lives lost on 14 June 2017, will lead to meaningful, systemic change, and scrutinisation of the usually invisible conditions of representation that racialise and dehumanise the urban poor.

The lyrics to Lowkey's "Ghosts of Grenfell 2," written to mark the first year anniversary of the fire, give some indication of his view on this point. "When invisible violence becomes visible, thinking is uncritical," Lowkey raps: "Listen to some, thinking we're simple and dumb criminals."

[36] Lowkey feat. Mai Khalil, "Ghosts of Grenfell".

The verses on this reprise of the original track point repeatedly to key culprits, while also highlighting the failure of both state and media apparatuses to hold them to account:

> Out your mind, if you think we're satisfied with platitudes
> Questions for RBKC, Celotex, and Sajid Javid too
> As nihilism sets in and the breakdowns start
> Slow creep of bureaucratic violence strains our hearts
> Feeling like an empty vessel, staring at an empty vessel
> Corporate hijack of regulations, very detrimental
> Human life, the cost – how can we not be feeling sentimental?[37]

In this simultaneous attack on both a system and the individual actors within it, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" has much in common with the work of spoken word poet, Potent Whisper, especially his forceful poem, "Grenfell Britain," which was first performed on YouTube less than three weeks after the fire and later collected in a small book of poetry, *The Rhyming Guide to Grenfell Britain*. "Grenfell Britain" is meticulously researched, drawing into view the elusive connections between multiple layers of outsourced interest groups – from Omnis Exterior and Harley Façades to Rydon, the TMO, and the council – that it would take the formal inquiry almost four more years to confirm. More notable still is the way in which Potent Whisper explicitly interprets these individual actors and their decisions in Engels's language of social murder:

> What happened at Grenfell, that was an act of war
> The murder of innocent people who died because they're poor
> Hundreds of deaths and you can be that there'll be more
> So if you think that you survived it, I wouldn't be so sure
>
> Maybe you thought you knew what redevelop-meant
> But if you believe that we develop, please develop sense
> If you live in social housing you'll be redeveloped next
> And then we'll all be redeveloped 'till we're redeveloped dead
>
> Cos what happened at Grenfell, that wasn't just "tragic"
> It was a deliberate attack, it was managed
> The people want justice and trust me they'll have it
> And part of that is asking how and why this happened[38]

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[37] Lowkey, feat. Kaia, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2", *YouTube*, 5 April 2019, accessed 14 March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axr8eMmVwgQ.

[38] Potent Whisper, *The Rhyming Guide to Grenfell Britain* (London: Dog Section Press, 2019), 65.

In these first three stanzas, Potent Whisper refuses the hyper-visibility of Grenfell as a "tragic" exception by linking it to the much wider developmental logic of what David Harvey pithily calls "accumulation by dispossession."[39] The fire emerges in this account as a product of the system functioning as usual, a banal but deliberate violence that is made visible by the second stanza's estranging repetition of develop/redevelop. Here, the relentless firings of "duh" and "puh" produce a verbal artillery of plosives that accumulate as the stanza progresses. The fire was "an act of war," argues the poet, and redevelopment rains down like bombs on social housing until, by the final line, "we're redeveloped dead." There are also revealing echoes of both Okri's and Lowkey's work. Like Okri, the use of a confrontational "you" aims to interpolate the listener or reader directly as witness (in the performed version of the poem, Potent Whisper looks and speaks directly into the camera). At the same time, and like Lowkey, the poet is keen to make clear that the dividing line between those who died in the fire and those who survive it – both within the community and beyond – is not so clear: "if you think that you survived it, I wouldn't be so sure." As for Lowkey, until justice for Grenfell is achieved, it may be that "the only ghosts are us."

Potent Whisper's aim in "Grenfell Britain" – the title of which satirises the anachronistic grandeur of "Great Britain" – is to build a form of class consciousness, suturing Grenfell into a much larger war against an increasingly demonised and racialised working class. He writes:

> It wasn't just Grenfell that suffered mass victims
> Every single day we're seeing Grenfell killings
> We suffer to corruption in a Grenfell system
> This isn't Great Britain, this is Grenfell Britain
>
> The disabled are on fire
> They're burning the workers
> The elderly are choking
> Your teachers are in hearses
> Students are on fire next to doctors and nurses
> Your hospitals, even your fire station's burning[40]

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[39] In much of Harvey's work is a basic recognition of racial capitalism and of the politics of representation and recognition as methods of resistance. He writes: "The class character of ethnic discriminations in accumulation by dispossession, and the way these differentially affect neighbourhood life, could not be plainer… But it is also in neighbourhood spaces that profound cultural ties based, for example, in ethnicity, religion, and cultural histories and collective memories can just as often bind as divide, to create the possibility of social and political solidarities in a completely different dimension to that which typically arises within the workplace." See David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), 133-134.

[40] Potent Whisper, *The Rhyming Guide to Grenfell Britain*, 71.

The implication is clear: we are all "ghosts of Grenfell." We may not have died in the fire, but we all continue to live under the system that produced it and, as Potent Whisper warns, "you can bet that there'll be more." We therefore reside in a liminal zone between continuing social life and the shadow of social death, a city of the missing in which the fire takes on a ghostly function, haunting imaginations and everyday lives. In "Ghosts of Grenfell 2," Lowkey loads this social reading of the fire's deathly shadow into the ash, smoke, and other toxic materials that poisoned the air around Grenfell: "That wretched cladding falling down, since then death is all around."[41] The physical and the metaphoric also conjoin in the song's central image: "Calling, still hear them calling / Black snow was falling." Shifting from the ontological to the hauntological, Lowkey pushes us away from the ocular spectacle of the blazing tower and towards the ghostly echoes of the voices of its victims. By aligning this hauntological politics of memorialisation with a politics of acknowledgement, both Lowkey and Potent Whisper refuse racial capitalism's refusal of recognition, and in so doing insist on the persistence of social life.

The City of the Stayed

The celebrated musician and writer, Roger Robinson, begins his T.S. Eliot Prize-winning collection of poetry, *A Portable Paradise* (2019), with verses dedicated to the victims of the Grenfell tower disaster. Entitled "The Missing," the poem imagines a small church congregation gathered together and seated in pews. Suddenly, ten members of the congregation begin to levitate. Their bodies "lie down as if on / a bed. Then pass down the aisle, / as if on a conveyor belt of pure air, / slow as a funeral cortege."[42] The poem names these chosen people as "The Risen," and describes how their bodies float through the church's "gothic doors / and up to the sky, finches darting deftly between them." Emerging with the bodies from the church, the poem then describes other people from the surrounding area, chosen seemingly at random, levitating at first, and then drifting up into the sky. Then, in an exquisitely crafted four sentence stanza midway through the poem, the poet allows us a glimpse of his meaning:

[41] Lowkey, feat. Kaia, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2."

[42] Roger Robinson, *A Portable Paradise* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2019), 9.

> A hundred people start floating
> from the windows of a tower block;
> from far enough away they could be
> black smoke from spreading flames.[43]

In an act of imaginative exhumation, Robinson disinters the bodies of the titular "missing" from the ash and smoke that streamed into the sky on 14 June 2017. He implies that the billows of smoke transmitted on television screens only looked that way from our distanced point of view, that up close the victims were real people with families, friends, and loved ones – which of course, they were. However, though zooming in, he does not lose sight of the whole. There is also detectable in this stanza an attempt to grasp the current of racism and the logic of extermination that is built into capitalism, and which is marked in the Holocaust as one of the most extreme and retrospectively visible instances of the industrial manufacture of death. Indeed, and especially in light of the suitability of Arendt's comments on the banality of evil to the causes of Grenfell, it is possible to see the chimneys of Auschwitz and Birkenau in Robinson's image of cremated people drifting up into the sky.[44]

However, Robinson's poem is not really about the recognition of social murder, nor – and unlike Potent Whisper or Lowkey – is it interested in holding the fire's perpetrators to account. Indeed, its sci-fi allegorisation of the disaster might more accurately be characterised as a refusal of the system that produced the fire altogether. After all, the fire remains only metaphorical in these lines, as Robinson inverts the logic of modernity itself by restoring human forms to the drifts of smoke and ash: "these superheroes," he writes of the people floating away into the sky, "this airborne pageantry of faith, this flock of believers."[45] The poem is concerned with the titular "missing" only, providing human details ("a woman / an Elvis quiff and vintage glasses," "an artist in a wax-cloth headwrap") and characterising them not as passive victims, but as agents of hope. Indeed, the tenor of Robinson's poem implies that they are the lucky ones, that – as Lowkey also implies – it is those of us who survive the fire who are the real ghosts. As the poem concludes:

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[43] Robinson, *A Portable Paradise*, 9.

[44] Consider these lines from Auschwitz survivor H.G. Adler's novel, *Panorama*, the first draft of which was written in just two weeks in 1948: "Josef imagines all of this and sees as well the chimneys smoking before him, hearing the screams of those choking on the gas, the screams of the departing intended for this world." As Lawrence L. Langer observes in his reading of Adler and Primo Levi, "the prevailing image of Birkenau was […] flame, belching forth from its chimneys the doom of its innocent victims, whose bodies were cremated there." See Adler, *Panorama: A Novel*, trans. Peter Filkins (New York: The Modern Library, 2011), 373), and Lawrence L. Langer, *The Afterdeath of the Holocaust* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 135-6.

[45] Robinson, *A Portable Paradise*, 10.

> Amongst the cirrus clouds, floating like hair,
> they begin to look like a separate city.
> Someone looking on could mistake them
> for new arrivants to earth.
> They are the city of the missing.
> We, now, the city of the stayed.[46]

With these lines, Robinson completes his poetic inversion of the Grenfell fire, his imagery reversing a flagrant instance of social death into a sudden flash of social life. Time is frozen in this stanza: the "cirrus clouds," wispy strands of vapour, hang with extraordinary stillness in the air; they move so slowly that an onlooker might assume the smoke is *returning* to the tower, rather than departing from it. But while static, this deeply photographic stanza is nevertheless haunted by its negative, as those who died in the fire – "the missing" – gather into a city of their own in the sky, one that offsets the terrestrial city, which is the city of survivors, or as Robinson puts it: "the city of the stayed." To stay means, of course, to stay in the same place, or in other words, to remain. But in Robinson's jarring use of the past-tense, the verb form "to stay" or "to remain" evolves into a noun: *to be stayed*, or *to be remains*. In this final snapshot of a stanza, it is the city of the missing that has taken on human form, that has become social life, that has become more alive; meanwhile, it is we, the survivors, the city of the stayed, who have been incinerated and reduced to remains.

In "The Missing," Robinson takes a politics of memorialisation, which already resists social death by reconstructing and recognising social life, and aligns it with a radical politics of acknowledgement that thickens the humanity of the victims in spiritual as well as material terms. Robinson's skill here is to present the hauntological apprehension of these lives through a notably ocular rather than aural image. With this in mind, I want to conclude this essay with two poems that use the form of words on the page to make a visual statement of recognition and remembrance, while also retaining the auditory thread that runs through so much of this work, from Okri's "you heard it" to Lowkey's "calling" refrains.

These poems are taken from the gender queer writer Jay Bernard's celebrated 2019 collection of poetry, *Surge*, which originated with the author's time spent exploring archival materials of the 1981 New Cross house fire. In the collection, Bernard draws a deliberate line from that fire – in which thirteen children died, resulting in a 20,000 strong march through London in protest against government neglect – through to the Grenfell fire. The section of the book dedicated specifically to Grenfell is introduced by a quoted interaction that took place on 12 July 2017 between the news

[46] Robinson, *A Portable Paradise*, 10.

presenter, James O'Brien, and Nazanin Aklani, a neighbour who lost her mother and aunt in the fire. In the exchange, O'Brien asks why the authorities are still unable to confirm the deaths of Aklani's loved ones. She replies: "You know, James, what's more horrendous than getting burned alive? You know, you ask yourself is there anything worse? And I'm afraid there is, you know. Having no remains."[47]

In the poems that follow, Bernard creates what Launchbury describes as an "improvised archive of the missing."[48] In the first, "Sentence," everyday scenes are described in sentences that have been broken apart by large slashes of the kind used in a game of hangman:

> If the two are in the kitchen / best friend also /
> unzipping fish spine from / its studded silver flesh / then sentence says –[49]

The poem's title, when combined with the ominous form of the hangman game and its ever-diminishing (life) chances, doubles here as a foreboding premonition of the fire to which the tower's inhabitants have been *sentenced* under racial capitalism. In the poem's final lines, the sentence has been served:

> the people have taken their hands away from their eyes / and have
> stapled their mothers and sisters to the underpass wall / their cousins
> and brothers and lovers to the underpass wall / only the missing –
> never the dead – to the underpass wall.
>
> Not rivers, towers of blood.[50]

Building the Grenfell Wall of Truth into their poem, Bernard elides the gap between the images of "mothers and sisters," "cousins and brothers and lovers," and the actual people, the bodies of the missing, that those images – posters, pictures, photographs – represent. Instead, mothers and sisters are stapled directly to the wall, the poem insisting on the intimate connection between the representation and the represented. This intimacy between reality and its representation cycles back, on the one hand, to the poem and to the collection itself, which aims to represent and that way to galvanise the social life of the Grenfell community. But on the other, the poem also concedes the

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[47] Jay Bernard, *Surge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), 44.

[48] Launchbury, "Grenfell, Race, Remembrance," 11.

[49] Bernard, *Surge*, 45.

[50] Bernard, *Surge*, 45.

representational power wielded by politicians such as Enoch Powell, whose infamous 1968 "rivers of blood" speech has functioned as a cultural pillar of racial capitalism in Britain, especially as it works on inner city and migrant communities. Bernard builds the consequences of such stigmatising representations into the poem's final line, which – with bitter irony – both confirms and corrects Powell's malevolent prediction with reference the violence of the Grenfell fire: "Not rivers, towers of blood."

There is, understandably, little that is hopeful in the early poems of this sequence. Another, entitled "Chemical," carries echoes of Okri's "ghosts that wander the area still trying / To escape the fires," of Lowkey's characterisation of the falling cladding and ash as "black snow," and of Robinson's city of the missing floating among the "cirrus clouds." This poem begins with the same hauntological conflation of deathly smoke and human spirit: "And all of their ghosts are burning / above the city," writes Bernard. The poet tries to read the remains of the missing into the ash rising out of the inferno, to search for the human forms of the missing that they know are contained within it. But in "Chemical," the fire goes out and the smoke is blown away before we are able to make any identifications: "And then the wind breathes sideways: / their soot is scattered, ghosts of the now-gone."[51] For a stronger shade of hope in *Surge*, we have to look past these meditations and to the collection's final poem, the title of which – "Flowers" – invokes Okri's image of the "world-changing dreams" flowering and unfurling from the burning tower. The shape of the poem is especially striking, and it is therefore reproduced in full here:

Flowers

Will anybody speak of this
the way the flowers do,
the way the common speaks
of the fearless dying leaves?

Will anybody speak of this
the way the common does,
the way the fearless dying leaves
speak of the coming cold?

Will anybody speak of this
the way the fearless dying leaves
speak of the coming cold
and the quiet it will bring?

[51] Bernard, *Surge*, 47.

Will anybody speak of this
the coming of the cold,
the quiet it will bring,
the fire we beheld?

Will anybody speak of this
the quiet it will bring
the fire we beheld,
the garlands at the gate?

Will anybody speak of this
the fire we beheld
the garlands at the gate,
the way the flowers do?[52]

Readers will immediately note the repeated first line that provides continuity through these cycling stanzas: "Will anybody speak of this." This is the question that grounds the poem, functioning much like a root that is embedded firmly in soil or land. It is the question that gives both the poet and the poem their purpose. Meanwhile, the other three sentences of each stanza rotate through the poem, imitating the gradual passing of the seasons. We begin in summer, with a common full of flowers; we move towards autumn, with its dying leaves and coming cold; we arrive in the quiet and dark of deep winter, where we behold the fire; and then we turn again to spring, when in the poem's last sentence the summer's flowers finally re-emerge. It is as though the poem's root, "Will anybody speak of this," has survived the smoke and ash cycling overhead, allowing the flower to re-emerge – like the poem itself – as a symbol of witness and a stand in for hope.

Indeed, looking at the distinctive form of this poem on the page, with its gentle curve away from and then almost back towards the lefthand margin, it is possible to see the stem of a flower bending in the wind. Then again, the strange arch also resembles the question marks that punctuate the final line of each stanza. In this view, the shape of the poem itself poses a question, composed from its component parts. Or perhaps it is both a flower and a question mark, an invitation for us to see the flowers that piled up against the Wall of Truth in the months after the fire as a call for justice based on a conjoined politics of memorialisation and acknowledgement. Or perhaps it is neither of these; perhaps the arched spine of the poem is, in a dual sense, concrete poetry, the typographical effect standing in for the ghostly shape of the tower itself.

[52] Bernard, *Surge*, 53.

Conclusion: A Different Kind of Question

In a "poetry manifesto" written for the *The Poetry Review* in 2017, just a few months after the fire, Bernard identified five similarities between the New Cross fire of 1981 and the Grenfell fire of 2017. They read as follows:

> a) There is a mystery at the centre of both stories.
> b) The people who died were not rich enough, in the eyes of the state, to be consequential.
> c) The mystery is not how the fire started or why these people died.
> d) The mystery is why we always find ourselves in the same place, the same moment.
> e) A poet can't deliver justice but they can ask a different kind of question.[53]

I started this essay by pointing out that the causes of the Grenfell fire were known to the community months and in some cases years before it took place. I suggested that the root cause of the fire at Grenfell was therefore not a *lack* of knowledge, but a refusal to *acknowledge* the voices of the community. For Bernard, this is the mystery that poetic responses to Grenfell should confront. It is a mystery rooted in the state's refusal to recognise those who are "not rich enough […] to be consequential." Mobilising around an aligned politics of acknowledgment and memorialisation, poetic responses to the Grenfell fire have refused this refusal. They have insisted on the presence of the city of the missing. They have amplified this city of the missing to include not only the victims of the Grenfell fire, nor of the New Cross fire, but all those subject to the racialised representations and bureaucratised violence of capital accumulation. In so doing, these poems go some way to turning procedures of racialisation around so that, in Jodi Melamed's words, "instead of legitimising processes of accumulation so extremely uneven that the lives of some must appear without value, racialisation – in the sense of the differential worth of human beings – will signal the necessity of altering material conditions."[54]

Bernard is right that a poet cannot deliver justice. But what this poetry shows is that justice requires community recognition and clear avenues for self-representation, and that this begins in artistic and cultural spheres, especially when there is no room for this representation in legal or political ones. Stuart Hall once observed that if "you work on culture, or if you've tried to work on some other really important things and you find yourself driven back to culture, if culture happens to be what seizes hold of your soul, you have to recognise that you will always be working in an

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[53] Jay Bernard, "Manifesto: Strange in the Archives," *The Poetry Review* 107, no.3 (Autumn 2017), accessed 15 March 2022, poetrysociety.org.uk/manifesto-jay-bernard-stranger-in-the-archives/.

[54] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 50.

area of displacement."[55] Perhaps this area of displacement is the space of the city of the missing, the liminal zone we all currently inhabit between the fire on 14 June 2017 and the justice for Grenfell that is yet to be delivered. If so, it is a space forcefully occupied by a growing body of poetry that asks a different kind of question; a question that recognises the social murder of the slum and offers in response an insistence on the community's social life. As Bernard concludes in their introduction to *Surge*, "I am from here, I am specific to this place, I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back."[56]

[55] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," in Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays Vol.1*, ed. David Morley (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019), 81.

[56] Bernard, *Surge*, xi; see also Launchbury, "Grenfell, Race, Remembrance," 11.