

## **Performing Common Grief: “The We Grieve Project”, Clapton**

It all started with Mike’s mum, who was sick of seeing the litter accumulate off the main road. Mike’s mum was nearly 100. So, a community litter pick was formed. This turned into a discussion group, fuelled by the interventions of one Rev. William Campbell-Taylor: a committed consensus-based decision-making community champion driven by a reconciliatory agenda<sup>1</sup>. A people’s community concern began to take shape. Clapton Commons Community Organisation took its name from the Commons at Clapton and the idea of the Commoner, which was at its heart. It’s first undertaking, was to reimagine a public space to replace a block of public toilets. From 2019 the words “THANK YOU” blared from the hoarding surrounding the mock-Tudor structure. It was painted in gratitude, to acknowledge those who had contributed crowdfunding. Then the virus struck. The “Thank You” sign on the stalled project, now jarred. Discussions were had (on Zoom and then on phone). “Mike”, William said, “can I leave it with you to talk this through with Holly-Gale? Holly-Gale, you’re a wordsmith, can you talk it through with Mike and come up with something?” And that’s how it began for me.

Stephen Sexton recently reflected on how grief is both individual and universal, because of its ubiquity. He said, and I quote, “I mean it is an absolutely ... personal experience. It also so happens that it has happened before to a great number of people. So, it is strange position where the most unique thing in the world is happening to you, but also the most typical”<sup>2</sup>. Sexton believes, therefore, that this necessitates our finding a new way to use language to talk about grief. Mike and I, therefore, needed to, in Sexton’s words, ‘get into that hermetic place where we were with it; where we were with that experience, we were with that emotion’<sup>3</sup> – and find a language that could evoke it. Although I am an Academic, I was asked to be the wordsmith here as I am also engaged in display and poetics as part of my practice (a lay-over from my performance and theatre days). I was

also approached because I was on maternity leave. As the lone-parent to a four-month-old, sleep was not on the menu, so I was up for late-night phone conversations with *anyone*, but I actually believe that that postpartum situation of Motherhood – accompanied with my own mother’s death three months prior to my daughter’s birth – put me, precisely, in that place that Sexton describes.

Mike and I had to do a lot of things at once and we only had nine hoarding boards to do it with. The painting of the boards was a communal activity, as it was out of doors and involved few people. It was done in a few hours. As to commemoration – we agreed that dates of birth and death were *not* what we were after, rather we sought a declaration of who those people were to *us*, not merely their statistical data. I brought up the idea of ‘Rosemary for Remembrance’ as Liberty Hall was planting its garden behind the hoarding, and this would tie in with the natural backdrop of our topos. From the beginning, we wanted something immediate that serviced our community – a community that was suffering conflicted feelings because their cultural conceptions of what constituted a ‘good death’ – quiet, peaceful and with your family surrounding you – was not occurring. In 1989, the grief expert Kenneth Doka coined the term ‘disenfranchised grief’<sup>4</sup> to describe situations where people struggle to cope with losses that are not socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged, or are able to be publicly mourned – a situation we realised we were now facing. Because of the social isolation experienced by the bereaved, their grief had nowhere to go; they had no place to set their sorrow, no place to perform their grief<sup>5</sup>. Something recently considered by journalists (e.g. Yong: 2022) and (e.g. Boss: 2021) scholars alike. So the wording on the hoarding had to do *all* that. It also had to represent everyone.

Our community in the Northeast chink of Hackney is extraordinarily diverse, housing one of the few Charedi communities in the UK, a “Red Rose Empire”<sup>6</sup> of white working class, historically one

of the two largest receivers of both the Windrush diaspora and the African diaspora of the 1990s, and a community most recently hit by wave after wave (first the artists, then the monied elite) of millennial gentrification. We are beyond multicultural; we are intersectional and tentacular in North Hackney. We needed something that touched us all. Two words, written in block letters – a universal statement. Eight letters and a space – WE GRIEVE – written large and on hoarding that directly faced a busy thoroughfare – the main artery in and out of the borough. This was the display. Powerful in its simplicity, it signalled that we stood together and that we had grief in common. As Rev. Taylor announced: “we stand together on the Common, which is common land, and acknowledge the grief we all are feeling not just for those who have died but the changes to life with the pandemic. There is real suffering going on and we acknowledge that together”<sup>7</sup> Soon it was a newsworthy public act that became a feature of North Hackney for just these reasons. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7035453/coronavirus-london-england-mourning/>

The community responded, flooding social media with its support. The wall had clearly done its job. Neighbours began to gather in front of it every Thursday, just before the nation paused to clap in support of health workers battling the pandemic. It was, after all, a sanctioned “safe space” for communion. Perhaps it was the allure of remembering individual lives collectively, when the responsibility for the pandemic itself was ambiguous, too frightening to comprehend and so politically obfuscated? I mean, How, precisely, do you tend to the memory of your dead in a social landscape that is forever shifting – where previous stable notions of control and consequence; ritual *and Rites; r-i-t-e-s* [and *Rights; r-i-g-h-t-s*] are forever shifting? Most of our community was already invisible in the ways that mattered, but this added a whole new layer of invisibility, *and* in the face of a contested experience. Understanding this, Mike (and I) were in agreement, that we rope in some form of commemoration early on. We decide on something that matched the signage

in simplicity – post the names of those we had lost on the hoarding. A simple sheet of paper pasted to the wall for each person remembered. Mimicking the disruption of unauthorised flyposting. Posting the names of the departed became ritualistic and this list of names – superseding the identification of people who gave money to a project – struck at something far more basic: grief. In this way, we found – almost by accident – that a physical space was needed for communities to come together and *see* grief, something we assumed but were not certain of. As Jacqueline Rose punctuated, and I quote, “it is partly to do with the pandemic and the things that this pandemic is making visible to the outside world. But the first thing is that I think that people are desperate for public sites of grief because I think bodies are going un-mourned; loved ones are going un-mourned, or not un-mourned but they are not having the rituals of commemoration.”<sup>8</sup>

As our now King acknowledged, unless you allow grief visibility, it can turn toxic. (And, as the father of two young boys who lost their mother so publicly, he should know). Grief, like destruction, are experiences that never pass, nor conclude. Instead, a practice of living-with grief amid the isolating trauma of the pandemic – living-on-and-through the loss – became a useful form of healing. So, every Thursday the community would gather to enact a ritual of grief that included people of all faiths and all adherents (or not) to social distancing and other pandemic ‘rules’ – a place of polyvalent ‘civic grief’<sup>9</sup>. As Butler observed – and this is a lengthy quote:

*Learning to mourn mass death means marking the loss of someone whose name you do not know, whose language you may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where you live. One does not have to know the person lost to affirm that this was a life. What one grieves is the life cut short, the life that should have had a chance to live more, the value that person has carried now in the lives of others, the wound that permanently transforms those who live on. What someone else suffers it is not one's own suffering, but the loss that the*

*stranger endures traverses the personal loss one feels, potentially connecting strangers in grief*<sup>10</sup>

Some days, the family members might say a few words. Another day a Buddhist singing bowl would sound and there was just contemplative silence. Sometimes the grief circle would echo with hymn singing that turned a bit raucous and then celebratory, as in a Nine-Night. Often there was just silence; such a silence you feared to break it. To outsiders, it would seem like nothing more than a few friends and family who were visiting those who were mourning as an act of support and friendship – in other words, A standing outdoor Shiva. These weekly ‘grief circles’ became central to a community processing loss precisely because they were so porous – they appealed to not just the shared vulnerability of the bereft, but everyone who felt vulnerable because of lock-down. As Emma will discuss, vulnerability, ‘unprecedented global vulnerability’ – is at the heart of pandemic thinking. “Vulnerability”, Butler reminds us, “is not just the condition of being potentially harmed by another. It names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives.”<sup>11</sup>

Significant work has been done in the epistemology of emotions in the last decades. Scholars have considered the weight of emotions and other affective states in nurturing moral concerns or informing decision-making, for example. At the same time, social epistemology has challenged the traditional individualist assumptions of epistemology, developing different paths of inquiry that include epistemic community practice, the pandemic allowed a stage in which the epistemic value of emotions outside the traditional individualist assumption could take centre stage and could intersect with ideas of care and ethnographies of grief. The idea of virtue is central to all this. Grief is an emotion that is epistemically both virtuous and effective. And here, in an environment of moral decay (in ‘need of repair’ as Lesley spoke of just an hour ago), our project offered a radical intervention that instigated a call – however subconsciously – to affect that repair.

Clearly, there is a role that is played by grief in our epistemic life, but that that life and debate could be shared in communion as citizens of grief takes the discussion in a new direction – a radical direction. Because such an act is a novel approach to the relationship between emotion and agency – it is more radically embodied and situated in intent and approach. Also, there is a heightened focus on the entanglement of emotion with socio-political and institutional contexts. As Jacqueline Rose put it: “the forms of contact that [were] not available in relationship to people who have died (intimate touch, close protectionism, and so on) resulted in a counter-statement to what we are being allowed and not allowed.”<sup>12</sup> While Rose was speaking to questions of violence against women in the context of the *Clapham* Common gathering, her line of thought contextualised what we were doing on *Clapton* Common in our gatherings – interesting alliteration there. And as Gabriella Calchi Novati has just proposed, if loss can be psychologically integrated as paradoxically productive, with us it provided a known space – a psychological, ethnographic, grassroots, bottom-up, radical, performative space – where a communal subjectivity and episteme emerged in tandem.

Other speakers today will speak to you of “consolidating the ontological meaning of identity and belonging through traditions and other rites of passage<sup>13</sup> and, it is worth noting, that we were aware of this aspect of our activity at the start. Indeed, we *sought* to engage with it to include more than we might exclude. Traditional rituals of grief were widely practiced in our community pre-pandemic, and we made a conscious effort not to replace or replicate them. Rather, we offered a space that might be of some use – a space of requirement if you will – to those who may be missing these supports. Marcia Mullings, for example, who came to remember her friend and brother, Gary, who died of cancer and had only a small funeral because of coronavirus restrictions, was such a

person. Being with her neighbours, she said, eased her pain. She was quoted as saying: “We remember that we have lost loved ones, but we also remember that we’re not alone in this.”<sup>14</sup>

The display was never meant to be permanent. Late in 2020, these performances ended with the easing of restrictions. One last public performance saw us remembering together for the last time by placing rosemary (for remembrance) sprigs on the names of all those we had accounted for. Liberty Hall opened, and the garden around it flourished. “Thank You, became “We Grieve”; “We Grieve” has recently become “We Welcome” – the title of an ongoing project, rooted in grief and trauma, that was a response to the rise in traumatised migrants and sojourners arriving into our community escaping the War in Ukraine. A neighbouring church and community space now hosts a regular Death Café, and Clapton Commons hosts regular ‘Warmer’ events that feature discussion groups on how best to rally against the inability of most of us to affordably heat our homes. While it is true that these events could be dissected for the problematic ways that they represent trauma, death and disenfranchisement in a hyper-polarised and politicised environment – what is new is that the necropolitics<sup>15</sup> of these interventions presume a shared understanding across our community. What is also clear is that design and the arts are increasingly being resourced as a strategy to process intersectional grief and trauma beyond Covid-19. Also, that this type of community action has now become ingrained in our citizen republics as a day-to-day experience. <https://www.claptoncommons.org/the-common-rooms>. Again, something to be problematised, but also something significant. Something has shifted in our localities. Those beholden to and beleaguered by a broken system, have found a communal voice in the collective sadness. I close with Natasha (Soobramanien) and Luke Williams’ comments pertaining to their co-written prize-winning novel, *Deigo Garcia*. Natasha recounts that “Luke and I were thinking about the Chagossian concept of *sagren*” – a concept, by the way, that like the Ukrainian sojourners I have just mentioned, was born

out of enforced exile. Sagren is “a Chagossian word for a kind of fatal sadness. It’s not easy to translate. But one thing that we found and that were quite amazed by was that rather than being an individualised form of grieving ... it is a collective sadness; it’s a collective grieving – at that means it’s political: because it stops being something that is eating you up and starts to enable action.”<sup>16</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Rev. William Campbell-Taylor is the Parish Priest at St Thomas', Clapton Common and was a founding Director of Clapton Commons. He has a Doctorate (a PhD) in the civic practice of text study between Christians, Jews and Muslims (scriptural reasoning) from Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States and he helped to set up the Jewish-Christian Forum in Stamford Hill in 2012. Previously to that, he worked as a Research Fellow at the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in the City of London, and as a University Chaplain and was active in the Occupy Camp at St. Paul's. While in the City of London, he served three terms as a Councillor; and became the first Labour Councillor ever elected to The Guildhall. William is (Acting) Chair of Clapton Commons, and oversees community relations, including organising work, as well as the charity's relationship with funders.

<sup>2</sup> BBC Radio 3, 2022, Free Thinking, 15 November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth J. Doka (1989) *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*, New York: Lexington Books/MacMillan.

<sup>5</sup> Sentiments profoundly interpreted in Ed Yong (2022), "The Final Pandemic Betrayal" in *The Atlantic*, 13 April, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/04/us-1-million-covid-death-rate-grief/629537/> (Accessed, 15 November 2022) and researched and rationalised in Pauline Boss (2021) *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*, New York: W. W. Norton.

<sup>6</sup> Hackney that Red Rose Empire...

<sup>7</sup> Crystal Goomansingh (2020) "Londoners find unlikely gathering place to mourn loved ones lost during COVID-19", *Global News Canada*, June 6, 2020

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Rose (2020) "*On Violence and On Violence Against Women*". On *Women's Hour*, Radio 4, 19 March 2021. 10.28.

<sup>9</sup> Danika Kirka (2020) "Covid 19 Coronavirus: Community Project Unites London Neighbours in Healing" *New Zealand Herald*, May 31, 2020, [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/covid-19-coronavirus-community-project-unites-london-neighbours-in-healing/YG5BVCNAGFUH5LEIK3PMAIPVZ4/?c\\_id=2&objectid=12336209](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/covid-19-coronavirus-community-project-unites-london-neighbours-in-healing/YG5BVCNAGFUH5LEIK3PMAIPVZ4/?c_id=2&objectid=12336209) (Accessed: 15 November 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler and George Yancy (2020) "Interview: Mourning is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and its Disparities" in the *Journal of Bioethical Enquiry*, 17(4): 483–487, (Published online) 09 November 2020. doi: [10.1007/s11673-020-10043-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-020-10043-6)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Rose (2020) *On Violence and On Violence Against Women*. On *Women's Hour*, Radio 4, 19 March 2021. 10.28.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold van Gennep (1960) *Rites of Passage*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> J. Achille Mbembé (2003) "Necropolitics" in *Public Culture*, 15:1, Winter, 2003: 11 – 40 and J. Achille Mbembé (2019) *Necropolitics*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.

<sup>16</sup> BBC Radio 3, 2022, Free Thinking, 15 November 2022. See, also, e.g.: David Vine (2011) Chapter 10: Dying of Sargren, from *The Island of Shame: the secret history of the U.S. Military base on the Island of Diego Garci*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400838509-015> and the above book.