

# Introduction

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

– John Berger<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

- 2 Gaston Bachelard, quoted in R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 1.
- 3 Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 5.
- 4 Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 6.
- 5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- 6 Maja Zehfuss, 'What Can We Do to Change the World?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 483–501. London: Routledge, 2009: 611.
- 7 Naeem Inayatullah, 'Why Do Some People Think They Know What Is Good for Others?' In *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, edited by Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 450–71. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014: 467.
- 8 Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantees.' *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 28–44.
- 9 David Scott, 'Stuart Hall's Ethics.' *Small Axe* 17 (2005): 1–16: 3. Original emphasis.
- 10 Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology', 43.
- 11 Scott, 'Stuart Hall's Ethics', 5.
- 12 Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- 13 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- 14 Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.
- 15 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986: 109.
- 16 Stultification is Jacques Rancière's term: Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.