



Holding onto emotions: A call to action in academia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Immigration
Social housing
Scholar-activism
Politics
Emotions

ABSTRACT

This intervention foregrounds two contemporary political situations across two continents, to stress how *emotions matter* in space and society. We are compelled to write about these unfolding, complex, troubling situations, specifically their visceral and emotive dimensions, to foreground how holding onto emotions is critical to academic research, thinking and praxis. We present our reading of two situations: the Grenfell social housing fire in the U.K. and migrant and refugee detention in the U.S. We highlight these cases to draw out the argument that nuanced, relativist epistemological and ontological approaches, including the place of emotions, are required as much as, and alongside, quantitative research, to better understand spatial and societal complexity, and enable transformative change. We thus call for renewed attention to emotional geographies, and methodologies that attend to embodied and emotional ways of doing, being, becoming and (co)producing knowledges.

1. Introduction

The subject matter that follows is distressing and difficult; which is precisely why we came to write about it. As individuals, and activists, we feel outrage at the injustices being perpetrated in the case studies we describe below. As critical academics, we understand our roles to involve research and teaching that analyses and engages with issues of social and spatial injustice. As scholars informed by wider feminist, critical race and queer debates, we recognise the underlying connections across these situations, namely processes of power and dominance circulated through interconnected material and emotional hardships, interwoven across geographical scales, from the international and national to the intimate and everyday.

We write this intervention because the processes of marginalisation and exclusion foregrounded here, produced and circulated through rising alt-right mainstreaming in both countries, are being mirrored in academia, through a recent (re)surge in attacks on social sciences and qualitative research (i.e., Lindsay et al., 2018). On the one hand, alt-right agendas deride emotions as legitimate research focus, as unquantifiable and therefore ‘not scientific’; yet at the same time, alt-right leaders manipulate emotions (especially fear) in public and policy discourse (Boler and Davis, 2018). In this intervention, we argue that while research should pay attention to objective facts and measurable empirics (i.e., numbers of deaths, months of refugee incarceration, and so on), it should also consider how shifting and contested perspectives,

positions and values are central in co-constructing social and spatial relations. The narratives we present below, therefore, foreground the latter. We begin with an account of the Grenfell Tower Fire in London, followed by a discussion of the migrant detention crisis in the U.S., to develop our argument for holding onto emotions as critical to academic praxis and scholar activism.

2. “I don’t see it as a tragedy. I see it as an atrocity”: Kye on the Grenfell Tower Fire in the U.K

On June 14th, 2017, a fire erupted on the 4th floor of Grenfell Tower, a social housing high-rise block in the municipal council borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London. The blaze quickly spread, engulfing the building and ultimately killing 72 people, trapped by smoke and flames on the upper floors. News and social media streamed shocking images of a towering inferno, and replayed audios of people’s last, frantic phone calls to loved ones.

To contextualize this tragedy, social housing is accommodation stock owned by municipal councils, which have a duty to provide ‘affordable’ housing for local residents unable to buy or rent property on the private market. Such housing is often managed via public-private partnerships, those involving contracted companies/organizations. Kensington and Chelsea is one of London’s wealthiest boroughs, where the cost of living and housing has long been high, and gentrification over the past decade has further inflated private housing markets. With

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an average house price of over £2million at the time of the fire (The Guardian, 2018a), many local residents' housing situations are precarious: social housing is vital yet in short supply, and there are multiple inequalities inherent between residents of social and private housing across employment, health care, education, leisure and other spheres. Grenfell Tower residents, then, comprised long-term working class, un/under-employed, intra- and international economic migrants, and asylum seekers and refugees, from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds.

Grenfell residents had long been campaigning about unsafe housing issues; most notably in relation to the fact that materials used to refurbish the façades of the 24-story block one year earlier were combustible, and not properly tested. Yet their concerns were routinely ignored by the council and Tenant Management Organisation (TMO). The Grenfell Action Group (2017) warned that such an event could happen, months before the fire, pointing out how national government had not followed recommendations made after a similar fire, in another London borough in 2009. As landlords, the council and TMO have duties of care, yet residents felt contempt (ibid., 2017).

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, the council also failed to provide adequate help to survivors. Media coverage overwhelmingly presented the council's response as shambolic, with a seeming disregard for human lives: or, rather, *these* human lives. Residents of Grenfell were people systematically maligned by dominant political and media discourses: repeatedly and commonly described as working-class 'benefit scroungers', as migrants who 'steal jobs/housing and burden the state', as asylum seekers who pose 'threats to the nation'. Grenfell residents' lives were long subdued by processes of slow violence, disenfranchised across political, economic, social and cultural spheres, routinely stripped of their humanity by exclusions embedded in racist, xenophobic, sexist, classed and ablest prejudices; people caught up in hegemonic, systemic fear of the 'other', and desire for dominant selves, at the heart of a sick/ening system, wrapped up as state structure (Laurie and Shaw, 2018).

The gap in state support for survivors of the fire was filled by volunteers and NGOs from across the city, comprising Londoners from diverse ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds, civilians who felt compelled to reach out and support fellow citizens. The outpouring of grief, anger and compassion was palpable. The government convened a public inquiry that commenced in May 2018, chaired by Martin Moore-Bick, a retired justice of the Court of Appeal of England and Wales. Such an inquiry is critical to both uncover where responsibility lies and as a crucial step in delivering justice. However, survivors, supporters and lawyers expressed significant concerns about the inquiry structure and process, and their intense lobbying led to a change to standard U.K. inquiry procedure. Instead of going straight into expert evidence-giving (from architects, builders, health and safety professionals, fire service staff etc.), space and time was given to 'pen portraits', in which survivors, families and friends spoke in person about those who were killed, in front of the inquiry chair and public gallery/audience. Previous inquiry processes have routinely dispensed with the dead, by 'counting' deaths only as numbers, and dealing solely with technicalities, thus limiting their reach to a contradictory evidential hearing in which various actors try to avoid blame: stark complaints had long been levelled at inquiries of this kind.¹ This alternate approach with pen portraits was critical in order to 'humanise' people, recognise real lives and try to grasp unquantifiable loss. Over the first full week of hearings, intimate, harrowing, loving testimonies were shared, about the emotional horrors of that night, in that place, and they have been crashing into other spaces and ever since.

The hearing started with heart-breaking testimony from Marcio,

¹ For example, the inquiries into the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence (1998–9), and multiple deaths at Hillsborough football stadium (1989).

whose son Logan was stillborn just hours after Marcio and Logan's mother escaped the fire. Miriam spoke of her grief at the death of her daughter Debbie: "A part of me has been ripped out".² Rasha travelled from Egypt to relate how her sister, Rania, and nieces Fethia and Hania, livestreamed their last moments to say goodbye; and that Rasha still messages Rania on Facebook to tell her she misses her. Mohammed revealed that he was orphaned by the death of all five members of his family. Marjorie and her son Ernie's last moments were described by a relative; trying to save themselves by running a cold bath, they were found fused together in it.

Personal photos, films and art were shown, poems read out. Stories were told about shared food and community, friendships and laughter, lives rich in their complexities and relationships. Humour was found between moments of deep distress. There were copious tears, and frequent hugs even between those unknown to each other, in and outside the court room. Karim, whose uncle Hesham was killed, angrily stated: "We are here because the system failed to protect my uncle". He was interrupted by the counsel (lawyer) to the inquiry, saying that such points should only come in later 'evidence'. When Karim responded, adding "We have been censored enough", there was a standing ovation to his statement. Hisam, who lost six of his family members, described having to stand outside and watch for hours as people burned: "*I don't see it as a tragedy. I see it as an atrocity*". These testimonies attest to the strength of emotions in response to the violence of Grenfell; and how the tenderness of close relationships are caught up in wider structures of power.

How does an inquiry, a community, a nation, academic research and writing begin to chart such loss and struggle? One vital way is to ensure that those who were involved are at the heart of the process of inquiry and enquiry; that those killed, and those left alive but deeply affected, remain central in all representation of the incident, and are incorporated within discussion of responsibility and policy change, as well as grounded academic theory and research. The pen portraits have widely been described as gruelling, tender, funny, haunting, angry, eloquent: "every one of them beautiful in a unique way ... it is impossible to be here and not care" (The Guardian, 2018b). Moore-Bick (The Guardian, 2018b) ended each day recognising how moving every testimony was, and pledging to treat them as 'integral evidence'. We recognise people, as more than numbers, by grappling with the emotions swirling through intersecting lives and geographies.

At time of writing, the inquiry is ongoing; whatever the outcome, the Grenfell fire is already argued to be caught up in decades-long, systemic, profit-driven decision-making, enabled by what appear to be unaccountable power structures and political elites (Goodfellow, 2018). Greed, desire, fear and abjection of the 'other' are key (Tyler, 2013). There is no simple 'pure logic' or material malfunction at root here, rather a grainy, worrying ethical and moral morass.

3. "In jail I just need your support and love": Kate on borders and immigration detention in the U.S

Across the Atlantic Ocean, America is undergoing its own emotionally fraught crisis. I write this from San Diego, California on the southern U.S. border. 2018 and 2019 have witnessed rising numbers of Central American migrant caravans. Many of these migrants are from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, nations with some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Fleeing crime and insecurity, men, women and children are increasingly joining migrant caravans for greater safety in numbers while they trek thousands of kilometres north. Thousands of these same migrants are now stuck in shelters and makeshift encampments on the Mexican side of the border, a mere 35 km

² Direct citations come from press reporting across the first week by The Guardian (see reference list). Only a few voices can be presented here, but the inquiry heard from many more.

from my home. Others languish for months, even years, in for-profit immigration detention centres on the U.S. side of the border, as they plead their asylum cases.

At the end of 2018, the Mayor of Tijuana declared a humanitarian crisis; meanwhile, the President of the United States moved 5000 U.S. troops to the border and authorized the use of lethal force. “This is an invasion of our Country”, the President tweeted, “and our Military is waiting for you!” (29 October 2018). In fact, on November 25th 2018, the U.S. Border Patrol launched tear gas over the border into Tijuana as hopeful migrants rushed the border fence separating the two nations. The U.S. Border Patrol then ordered a temporary closure of the border to defend against this perceived invasion. In reference to the caravan, Trump declared, “Mexico should move the flag waving Migrants, many of whom are stone cold criminals, back to their countries” (26 November 2018). Meanwhile, photographic evidence of the “invasion” documented young mothers fleeing tear gas, with barefoot children in diapers in tow.

In the current political moment, Americans live in a post-truth world where facts no longer hold sway (Boyer and Davis, 2018). Rather, millions of Americans are voting and reacting on the basis of gut feelings. There is increasing distrust of the media, given that many outlets are often accused of propagating “fake news” and using “crisis actors” to spread lies (Wilson, 2018). This has created a situation where emotional appeals and personal beliefs tend to hold more credence than hard data and facts. Moreover, within this post-truth moment, Americans are increasingly living in segregated worlds, divided by geography, politics, and identity. Arlie Hochschild (2016) describes the geography of the United States in terms of “empathy walls”, where vast regions are segregated into emotionally toned enclaves; where people affect hostility and indifference to those outside of their social spaces.

This situation is particularly troubling given the crisis of rights and responsibility on the U.S./Mexico border (Torres, 2018). When President Trump and his supporters cry for a border wall to protect Americans from southern invasions of perceived “rapists,” “bad hombres” and “thugs,” they are motivated by a xenophobic fear of the unknown ‘other.’ While the prototypes for the southern border wall may remain symbolic for now, they also symbolize a genuine empathy wall and a shallow understanding of the United States’ tangled history with Central America and Mexico, which plays a large role in the present-day border crisis (Swanson and Torres, 2016). Migrants are being cast as dangerous threats to national security, which legitimizes their criminalization and exclusion (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). In effect, the current administration thrives on its manipulation of fear and raw emotions to draw support for further fortification of the U.S./Mexico border.

While some respond with fear and embrace punitive responses, others speak to morality, human rights and empathy. The federal government has embraced the former approach, best encapsulated by its zero tolerance border policy, which separated thousands of children from their families in an effort to punish and deter unauthorized migration. In response to public outcry, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions replied, “If you don’t want your child separated, then don’t bring them across the border illegally. It’s not our fault that somebody does that” (Horwitz and Sacchetti, 2018). Rather than acknowledge the dire conditions of poverty and violence that are pushing families to flee their homes, this response blames ‘bad’ parents for ‘poor’ decisions instead.

The visuals and stories emanating from the child separation policies have tugged at the heartstrings of the American public. By the end of July 2018, over 2600 migrant children were separated from their families and placed in government custody (ACLU, 2019). One year later, children are still being detained in camps, without access to soap, toothbrushes, diapers, or clean clothes (Dickerson, 2019). News headlines have run stories of “children in cages,” or children massed together in pens separated by chain linked fences (BBC News, 2018). Others have likened American immigrant detention centres to modern-

day concentration camps (Katz, 2019).

This human rights crisis has moved an overwhelming number of people to take action against what is perceived an inhumane situation, including me. Over the summer of 2018, I helped build a grassroots organization that provides financial and emotional support to detained migrants and refugees in American immigration detention centres.³ When people sign up to volunteer for the organization we ask them to explain why they want to help. Most cite deep emotional and visceral responses to the current situation, particularly as witnesses to the pain of migrants separated from their children. They use words including “appalled,” “sickened,” “pained,” “heartbroken,” “distraught,” “disturbed,” “outraged,” “horrified,” and “ashamed.” In a response that encapsulates many Americans’ feelings about this situation, one volunteer wrote that she joined, “Because I believe in human decency, compassion, empathy, and morality. I am sickened by the wrongful imprisonment of my fellow human beings.”

Through an epistolary relationship, our volunteers bear witness to how it feels to be locked up in a for-profit prison. As you might imagine, it does not feel very good. Reflecting on his detention in the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, California, a political refugee from Cameroon writes, “I feel so emotionally challenged and tortured and to me this is what we call silent killing. How can somebody escaping from prison and come to you to help him and instead of helping him you arrest him and put to jail again?” (DALC, 2019a). Another asylum seeker from the Congo writes about the how the letters he receives represent hope. He states, “I am so happy to receive your letter. Your letter is not just a letter. It is a hope and light in the darkness. It is a light in a life storm. In jail I just need your support and love” (DALC, 2019b).

In the present political moment, this love and support is deeply divided by region and political affiliation. At former Attorney General Sessions’ announcement regarding the government’s new zero tolerance immigration policy, a heckler shouted out: “Do you have a heart? Do you have a soul?” (Horwitz and Sacchetti, 2018) How do we break down these empathy walls to understand our shared humanity? How do we move beyond numbers and statistics regarding “illegal aliens” to hear, see and feel the human stories behind these numbers? How do we elicit compassion, care and hope into the current political moment when migrants and refugees remain dehumanised, racialised and othered in dominant political rhetoric? While writing letters to migrants and refugees does little to solve the mass incarceration of migrants in American for-profit prisons, it does help foster human connection across difference. Many Americans choose to close their eyes and cover their ears because the emotional responses surrounding this issue are too much to bear. Yet, holding onto emotions – no matter how uncomfortable – can help break down these empathy walls, and may even move people to enact change.

4. Emotional re-turns

These two narratives evidence the central role of emotions in/across political and socio-economic geographies, as interscaled and interconnected, refracted and fractured across cultural spheres. As academics, we agree with Davidson et al. (2014: 1) that “the days of having to establish that emotions *matter* are thankfully receding”; and still we *are moved by these situations* to reiterate the critical need for expanded research and teaching regarding emotions, society and space.

There are two calls to action we flesh out here, intended as stepping off points for further debate. The first is a **renewed call to hold onto emotions**, and to honour the ways in which emotional geographies are

³ This organization is called Detainee Allies (www.detaineeallies.org). We’ve now received over 1200 letters from detained migrants and refugees from over 35 different nations, which we’ve donated to the SDSU Special Collections and Archives to create the Detainee Allies Letter Collection (<https://digitallibrary.sdsu.edu/islandora/object/sdsu%3AOTayMesaDetentionCenter>).

inherently woven through all human experiences and interactions, with other people, places and things. We are especially concerned with how emotions and affect are implicated in issues of social and spatial justice: *how it feels* to endure exclusion and violence of all kinds; to be homeless; to be unable to provide basic needs for yourself/family; to be incarcerated; to witness, directly or indirectly, another's suffering; and to research, teach and write about these issues. In recent times, re-invigorated political right wing movements in the countries cited above, and more widely, are trying to manipulate emotions (especially fear) to exclusionary ends, while denying the role of emotions in public and civic life (Younge, 2018). To challenge the former, we need to call out and investigate the latter. While alt-right movements often claim their rigour comes from rationality (especially in their anti-identity-politics stance), their praxis belies this, and the very basis of more fluid, complex, non-binary theories are upheld by this paradox.

We therefore reiterate that emotions matter in response to ongoing threats to feminist, queer, post-colonial, critical race and related theories and ways of working, at a time when such academic work is being denigrated among the alt-right. Claims to (a simple) truth detectable by 'science', using specific methods of data-gathering, statistical analysis, hypothesis testing, and replicating results to determine an objective reality and observable phenomenon are long-standing. More recently, critiques of 'grievance studies' purport to unmask 'dangerous' moves based in 'identarian politics over the impartial pursuit of truth' (Lindsay et al., 2018). Such critiques emphasise reason over emotion, rigour over solipsism, and logic over revelation.

Thinking about the two situations described above, and drawing on precisely the feminist, critical race, queer and other theories under attack, we argue that rigorous, robust social science opens out beyond such binaries: logic, reason and rigor are interconnected with emotions, emergence and revelation. Paying attention to that which cannot be tested and measured does not negate methods and approaches that test and measure. Rather, more nuanced, relativist epistemological and ontological approaches are *simultaneously* required to better understand the complexities of situations such as border walls and inquiries into social atrocities. There are *also* objective 'facts' to glean from the Grenfell fire and immigration detention in the U.S.: numbers of deaths and lives disrupted, statistics relating to migration, incarceration, and so on, are critical to academic and policy endeavour too. Working across different 'standpoints' is central, not antithetical, to science and ethics.

The second call to action, embedded in the first, relates to **methodological approaches to knowledge production**. Emerging work across the social sciences pays serious attention to researching emotions-as-topic, and *incorporating* the emotional in/through embodied ways of knowing. In this journal, Bondi (2014: 44) explored the methodological possibilities of psychoanalysis, arguing for its potential to foreground how ideas about unconscious communication "can be used to help to make sense of emotional dimensions of research interviews and the narratives they generate". In turn, Bennett et al. (2015: 7) critically unpacked embodied listening, a practice "that weaves through, around and beyond what is immediately heard, including the unspoken, the articulateness of objects and the listening that comes through participating", and which 'haunts' research and researchers after fieldwork is over.

More broadly, new methodological emphasis on creative and practice-led methodologies (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017), encapsulating and interrogating the links between materiality, research process (art, baking, crafting, singing), spaces and bodies, with how we think, reflect, (co)produce, write and disseminate knowledges with-and-about emotion (Fitzpatrick and Longley, 2014). These methodologies resonate with current moves across social science, toward more-than-human theory in which planet, places, and things are thought-and-felt as part of, rather than being external to, socio-political events and research: the flammable cladding that wrapped Grenfell, and the metal-concrete of border and prison walls are inherently caught up in the visceral and

emotional geographies highlighted above.

Furthermore, these methodological turns to emotion are important in debates on and processes involved in doing participatory and action-oriented research, in which social justice and transformative change is key (Askins et al., 2018). Hope, compassion, empathy, anger, and care are recognized as motivations for, and also underpin experiences in, academic-activism and more-than-research; holding and utilising emotions and affect as driving forces in lived, committed, ethical and embodied ways of doing, being, becoming and (co)producing knowledges (see Mitchell, 2016). Such emotional re-turns open out to critical interdisciplinarity and new areas of concern, action, and understanding. In a 21st century filled with crisis, inequalities and significant challenges across societies and environments, ignoring feelings lacks academic rigour – and ignores our basic humanity.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100617>.

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